NOVEMBER 1993

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THE WORLD'S LEADING
MYSTERY MAGAZINE

ERIC AMBLER
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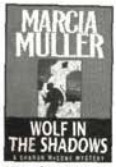

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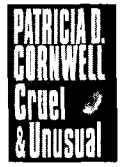

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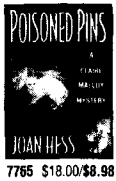

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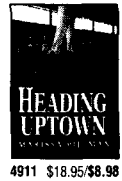

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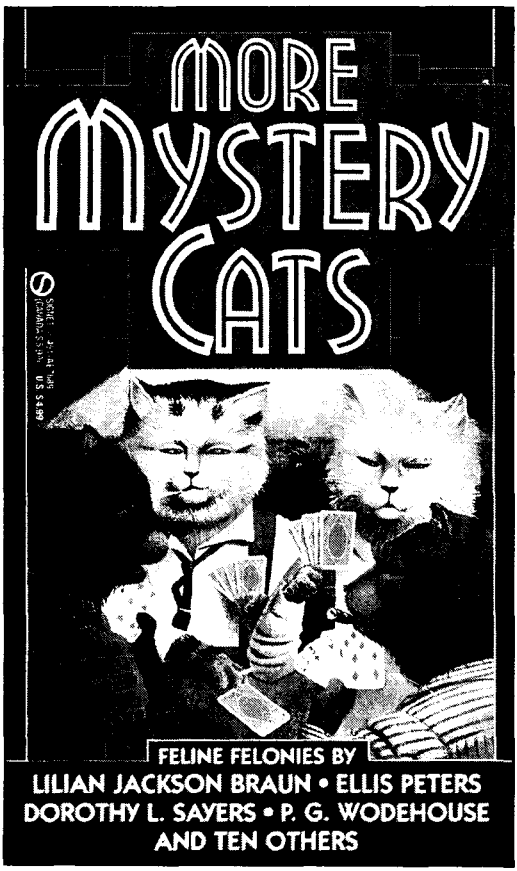

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Australian Ann Morven debuts here for EQMM *with a tale of bullfighting—both the Spanish and the Aussie style. (See page seventeen for glossary of terms.)*

THE CLUE OF THE WILLY-WILLY

by ANN MORVEN

The willy-willy nearly took my ute as I drove over the red plains to Cattlecreek, then it was raining bullybeef tins. One gouged my handbag as I braked to a halt, and I read on the faded can label: "Use before Feb 1898."

There's plenty of history in rubbish tips of the Australian outback, but Willy also brought a crimson cape that caught my fancy. Stiffer than ordinary silk, its edges were embroidered in fine gold thread. I held two corners of the garment, letting Willy's tailwind spread it out for me, which is when I noticed the bloodstain.

Caked from the centre, its dark presence claimed most of that rippling rectangle. The breeze prickled my neck.

It's bull's blood, I reassured myself. *It'll wash out. Keep it.* I drove on to join the rodeo.

Although back of nowhere, Cattlecreek's annual shindig pulls champions from afar—its hospitality is renowned and its prizes worth a broken leg. This year, according to the handbill in my bra, the entertainment included a group of Spanish bullfighters from Bilbao on a government-funded culture programme. I imagined these sword-wielding athletes might have lost the grisly cape to the willy-willy. Maybe I should offer to return it.

The Cattlecreek Hotel, iron-laced along its dipping verandas, had the weathered grace of a wise old dowager. The red gravel surrounding it was crowded with horse floats and cattle trucks, crew-cabs, caravans and four-wheel-drives, wagons, camper vans and a minibus or two, plus an overspill of fly-tormented drinkers from the dark interior. A dirt-streaked Holden pulled away as I approached and I claimed its vacated space.

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The town's prevailing smell of weary cattle and hot horses mingled with that of the beer. My boots took me through scattered dung to wide wooden steps, above which a painted legend stated: Alfred (Digger) Allwell, Licensee.

It was an ornate double door of the style allegedly favoured by Queen Victoria and its aged wood was carved with roses and shamrocks, beckoning me to enter a vast and gloomy foyer, where a poster on the unplastered brick wall announced boldly:

RODEO
World Champion
Mutador
in action

The ultracondensed type, in diminishing size, also mentioned the calf roping and brumby riding, log-chopping, and heaps of fumily fun. My name was at the very bottom, in telephone directory print: Sheil B. Wright, the Bush Bulladeer.

Good idea for one of my songs, I thought—I'll make up a ballad about misprints. But first I needed attention and the reception desk was deserted. I palmed the desk bell in vain. Doubtless Mr. Alfred (Digger) Allwell was amid the public bar din along the veranda.

I went there, entering to the merry pub roar as stubbies and middies were flourished ad libitum, while the innkeeper, protected by his longbar, made music on the till.

A group of black-vested bullies was trying to harmonise, causing distress and lost rhythm to a small man in a spangled cowboy suit. He yelled angrily and vainly for silence as he hopped in and out of his spinning lariat. Elsewhere through the cigarette fug, a noisy game of darts was in progress.

Men and women of all ages were sipping, quaffing, and gulping; flirting, debating, and laughing; and it all came to a silent halt, everybody, when I walked in.

Women my age still feel self-conscious walking into a pub, once a strictly male domain, but I judged the abrupt hush and the stares a bit overdone. Even the big-bellied king of the bar paused mid-change, glare fixed accusingly. You'd think I was bearing a bomb in my hand instead of a dirty old cape.

"Mr. Allwell? I booked a room by telephone."

He gave me a snarl of brown teeth and feverish blue eyes. "I'm calling the police!"

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I gaped at the expanse of hostile stares, then, like them, focused my eyes on the bloodstained cape. I shook it out, twitched my weighty hips inexpertly, and said, "Olé! Found it up the track."

Nobody laughed, but they all kept gawking, and Mine Host Digger leered suspiciously. "Yair," he muttered without moving his lips, shifty-eyeing a table of swarthy men in jeans and T-shirts who had their hair tied with neat red ribbons.

One was standing, his high cheekbones and proud nose panning from the cape to my flabbergasted features.

"I didn't steal it," I gabbled.

He did a skinny bow and clicked silver buckled boots. "Señorita, I am the Matador! Don Xavier Narcisco de Redondela."

"Sheil B. Wright, mate, songmonger. G'day."

"Where?" he demanded, preening the hairy boomerang under his nose. "And how? Explain how you are having that *muleta,* and that blood being upon it." The whole menacing bar mob heard my dubious tale, then the beer resumed its flow pending arrival of the police.

Still quietly snarling, Digger pulled me a cold balm: "On the house, mate." It wasn't so much from pity as a reward for my dramatic entrance, which had activated this new flurry of thirsts.

While I sipped, he told me: "Got done in. Town's guest of honour for the rodeo. Spanish ambassador."

I learned the crimson cape had been a ceremonial gift, presented before that same crowd in that same bar the night before, from the toreros to their compatriot. He was not the ambassador, in fact, but head of some Canberra trade office.

The formality had been witnessed by all, hence their instant recognition of the cape and their unfriendly reaction—for the consular official had vanished in alarming circumstances.

Digger grinned. "Pool'v blood. On his bed upstairs, and right across the floor." The official's belongings were untouched, his helicopter remained waiting in the paddock, his pilot mystified.

Don Xavier thrust out his wiry chest. "This was no robbery. The gendarme found his money and valuables in the room. Gold watch, diamond cuff links—our government pays diplomats yeneroosly."

I gathered from his twitching mouser and agitated eyes that the corrida athlete was not quite so well catered for, even though he too represented his nation.

A podgy hulk came in wearing a slouch hat and the expression of a zombie. Two rebel curls, shaped like handcuffs, graced his brow.

"Here's Barney," said the pubkeeper. "He'll sortcher."

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Barney was an outback constable, which gave him a territory to patrol bigger than all Texas, and the reputation of Superman. He was carrying excess weight, like me, but in Barney's case it was akin to a bull fattened up for prize-judging. Beneath the flab, which no doubt was acquired over endless paperwork or in driving unhealthy distances in his pursuit car, were chest and flanks that would not have disgraced a stud champion.

As for a force for maintaining law and order, the world has nothing to equal the bush constable: dedicated loners.

Behind Barney was another large bloke, who announced loudly and publicly that he was Mayor B. S. Sullivan. "B.S. for Bigshit," Digger muttered.

Mayor Sullivan, who wore an expression like he'd just trodden in cow poo, was lecturing Barney: "Remember, Constable, we don't want to bring the town's good name into disrepute." He underlined this with a sniff in my direction.

Barney hadn't said anything, ignoring Sullivan while examining the bloodied cape. He raised an eyebrow to the matador, who confirmed, "Sí, that's the *muleta*. No doubt."

A dark woman clutching Don Xavier's elbow nodded her lovely head, a Spanish portrait if ever there was one. Long straight nose, upswept locks, and a neck smooth and graceful as a Guipuzcoa swan. I recognised her as Carmen de Otero, billed as The Fiery Dancer Who Gives Your Heart A Raging Thirst.

Her eyes, I noticed, were flashing secret signals to Xavier.

"Blood," said Barney, his smooth-shaven jowls gleaming like an Aberdeen Angus. "Humpf."

"There were old tins of bullybeef," I babbled. "That willy must have gone through your town dump. Did you look there for the missing diplomat?"

Barney stayed expressionless. "Reckon I'll get Doc to test this blood." He turned his remorseless cop eyes on me: "Don't leave town, mate."

"Without my permission," added Sullivan.

The bullfighters were jabbering in Spanish, and the boozers were chanting in chorus: "Search the dump! Search the dump!"

Sullivan's suave pose wobbled, but Barney glared the crowd to silence with his zombie stare, then stated flatly, "I'll decide what's to be searched." He paused, pawing the ground as it were. "And who."

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The closest barrackers looked guiltily pale, and one mumbled, "No offence, Barney. Avadrink, mate."

Barney weighed this idea in macho silence, giving me the impression that between his ears was bone and nothing else, solid as a steer's skull—which wasn't the case at all, as shown when we cracked this mystery.

"Duty, mate," he said finally with a shake of that bullish head. "Carn't drink on duty." He pinched the brim of his hat, as if to clarify his present status.

Bigshit Sullivan, who I was told hoped to gain National Party nomination at the next state elections, stood on a stool to make his response. "Dear visitors, tourists, citizens, and fellow ratepayers, Cattlecreek hereby pledges! This town shall strive in every way to find its distinguished guest, the Honourable Señor Juan Sainz de la Maza Brotat." He was the only local who could rattle off the whole name like that.

"And we wholeheartedly promise to upturn every stone and blade of grass, to seek out any culprit, or culprits, as may be the case et cetera. In the meantime, ladies and gentlemen, the show goes on—it's our most ambitious rodeo ever. Welcome to Cattlecreek, folks, and spend big!" As only to be suspected, he owned the showgrounds, shopping centre, garage, and Digger's hotel mortgage.

"Search the dump!" a brave soul grunted a split second before yodels, whistles, and raspberries hastened Councillor Sullivan's exit in the wake of the zombie cop.

I had seen guilt or accusation in Carmen's eyes, and a few planted questions amid the pub gossips told me she'd been flirting with the town's guest from Canberra—to the annoyance of proud Xavier, her husband.

Digger allocated me an upstairs room in the historic pub, next door to the bloodstained bed which he insisted on showing me. "Take a decko," he commanded with enthusiasm. "Clothes in the closet, shoes at the bedside. Barney took charge uv the wallet and sealed the door."

"But you've just opened it!"

"Thass okay, Sheil. Barney knows I wouldn' disturb nuffin." He tugged at the gruesome bedcover to straighten it, ushered me out, and locked the door again. "Doc'll wanner check them bloodstains. Musta bled like meat on an abattoir hook, heh, heh."

Later that day, a householder who was dumping garbage at the communal tip on the edge of town discovered the diplomat's body.

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It had apparently been uncovered by the willy-willy from a shallow grave among the scattered refuse.

Almost all of Señor Brotat was recovered, but not the skin. This had been partly, and expertly, removed in neat sections, as if with a skinning knife. Also, the torso had deep knife wounds: forty-three, said the town doctor.

The head was intact, and therefore easily identified. From each eye protruded a long steel hairpin with clasps of tortoiseshell lacework—the kind favoured in the traditional coiffure of Spanish ladies.

"They are not my hairpins!" Carmen spat at Barney. "Old junk like that! Shish! If I want to take out a man's eyes, I use these!" And she flashed her blood-coloured talons before his bovine face. Then she laughed defiantly, tossed her shoulder-length hair, and strutted out of the bar.

"Cripes," muttered Digger. "Thass orl she cares, an' she was studding the bloke."

In due course, Doc confirmed that the blood on the *muleta* cape I had found was the same as that of the corpse. He also suggested, in an open report to Mayor Sullivan and Barney at the pub, that the victim had been bled to a state of weakness upon the hotel bed, then wrapped in the cape and carried off for more torture with the skinning knife. "He was a large man, mind. Wouldn't be easy. He died from shock, by the way. Same again, Digger old son, if you please."

"Yair!" Digger's eyes sparkled greedily. Such ghoulish revelations expedited his beer sales.

"The hairpins?" Doc conjectured. "Probably they were added after death. A macabre touch. Believe me, Barney, this was revenge."

Sullivan shook his head, rejecting the disgrace on his town, while Barney, playing dumb cop, simply cast expressionless eyes around the wide-eared customers as he displayed the hairpins, one in each hand. "Anyone seen these before?"

"Antique," a hidden voice replied. "You don't get stuff like that around here. Why not ask the dagoes?"

Barney maintained his macho mask and made no reply, but clearly everything pointed to the Spanish troupe.

Cattlecreek's weekly rag, the *Clarion,* confined its reporting of the event to the gruesome details and colourful quotes by pub patrons, but the *Australian,* which caters to a national readership, published some interesting background. There it was in black and white: the

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late and distinguished Señor Brotat smiling at us from the page, beneath a heading which read: OGRE SLAIN.

Less gory facts of the diplomat's death were given, plus a paragraph noting that he had formerly been a provincial deputy in the Pyrenees:

> The late General Brotat was once known as the Ogre of Avala, due to his repressive measures against Basque separatists.

Wow! Here was a motive for the torture and for the brutality of his slaying, so I hastened to bring it to Barney's attention. The cop blinked lazily, nodded slowly, and took the newspaper to the hotel to show Don Xavier, who thought he was being accused.

"What? You think I bloody Basque!" The offended matador stomped across the barroom to jabber with his cronies, who began waving their arms and making hostile bellows at the implacable Barney.

"We are from the south," Don Xavier insisted with stiff-necked dignity. "We do not support Basque terrorists. The general was our *hero, and he saved the bulls too.*"

"Saved what bulls, mate?"

The matador bristled. "He saving our bulls from Australia. The Iberian stock. Is our heritage. Your stockbreeders been trying to steal them—the best Miura from Seville."

"Well I doan know about that, mate," muttered Barney, and his toneless voice seemed to irritate the bullfighter.

"Semen!" Don Xavier shook his fist. "You want the frozen semen."

"Not me, mate. Cow breeding's not my line."

"Your cattle dons, then. Australia want our treasure, the Miura bull, just as you stealing our fine merino sheep to make number one wool market."

Barney was doing his slow blink, which I've heard is how the chubby wombat reacts to fire and tempest. An unhurried creature of the outback was Barney, biding his moment.

When the torero had calmed down, Barney asked: "Are you saying this bloke Brotat used his consular position to stop some bull-breeding deal?"

"Sí. I say it, I have told you—a hero. Was on Madrid television."

The policeman glanced at me before asking the shrewd question, "Sir, please think with care—are any of our local cattle stations involved in this deal?"

"Is no deal," Xavier snapped. "The general, he prevent it."

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"Yes, but now he's dead . . ."

"Spain will never allow it. Never." The don brushed past us and stalked down the hotel corridor to where his troupe had its rooms.

"Cripes," mumbled Barney. "Looks like I'm investigating a dead hero."

I pointed to the newspaper. "A dead hero with a reputation like an Inquisition priest."

Barney rolled it casually to fan a bushfly away from his beer, then stuffed the creased pages into his shirt. "I'll hold onto this, mate. Thanks for the thought anyway."

Next day was the rodeo.

"A la rurru niño," I sang in keeping with the Spanish theme, "a la rurra ya."

It's a cradle song (Hushabye my baby) but the local competitors and crowd weren't to know that. The toreros, however, claimed they were flattered and amazed that an Aussie gal could be so knowledgeable.

After my introductory turn, I went looking for Digger in the beer tent to claim the free refreshment to which entertainers were entitled. Behind me, I could hear the laughs and the screams of the opening bull-riding contest.

Eager prize-seekers were risking life and limb going bareback on beasts that had been captured in the wild. By Cattlecreek tradition, the horns were left uncapped.

I spotted Digger from a distance. He had abandoned his role as barman and was standing high on the rails yelling. "He's got no right. Boo!"

I climbed up beside him. "What's wrong?"

"That dago wowser's objecting to Jimmy Nyungah. Gerrout, ya ding! Boo!"

I looked, and the sight nearly knocked me off my bushwood perch: doing cartwheels about the dusty ring was a petite Spanish lady complete with vivid long skirts, fat red wig, and, yes, two long bright hairpins sticking from it. Her face was painted like a black clown, with bulbous red nose and exaggerated white lips.

"That's Jimmy Nyungah?"

"Best rodeo clown in the world," Digger boasted. "You met him in the bar—the cowboy dancing with the lariat."

The matador Don Xavier was standing mid-ring, having interrupted the bull-riding to protest to the rodeo master and chief judge,

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none other than Mayor Sullivan, who sat in a raised box beside the announcer's microphone.

"Huh," Digger grunted. "He claims itsa insult to Spain or to his wife Carmen or somethin'. Touchy dago bastid."

But the organisers were obviously keen to avoid upsetting their foreign guests, for Jimmy the Spanish Lady, best rodeo clown in the world, was told to desist. He sulked away while fellow clowns in less provocative gear continued their task of distracting angry bulls from thrown riders.

"Thass not fair," Digger said hotly. "Jimmy's got feelin's too."

But my thoughts were on Jimmy's headgear rather than his feelings. His hairpins were actually banderilla spikes wrapped in coloured paper. Like thin two-foot swords, they extended each side of the bushy wig. Their barbs, I knew, were designed to penetrate the tough shoulder muscles of a bull.

In his great red swirling skirt, top-knot erect and defiant, Jimmy looked every inch the fiery Spanish tomato as he flounced from the arena, causing Digger to chuckle in admiration. "In that gear, ya'd never think he was an Aborigine."

My thoughts flashed to the dark-skinned dancer Carmen, and hidden passions, and jealousy.

"Has Jimmy done anything to make Don Xavier jealous?"

"Sure," jeered Digger. "Stealing the crowd's attention. That Spanish wowser must be livid. Likes all the cheering for hisself."

I hastened towards the dressing tent as a bugle announced the picadors coming on to ride their armoured horses against the meanest bull of the day. Beneath their low-crowned, wide-brimmed hats, they made a dashing sight as they cantered about, brandishing lances and dressed in trousers I'd been told were made of leather an inch thick.

Don Xavier was on foot mid-ring in his short embroidered jacket, waistcoat flashing gold as he raised his arms and strutted for the crowd in his silk tights and coral-pink stockings. No leather for the golden matador. He displayed himself in silk and satin, with delicate bobs of chenille hanging from his tiny cap. He carried a small heart-shaped cape and a long sword.

"Olé, olé!" the rasping shouts echoed. "Stick the bugger, mate."

Guiltily, I found my sympathies with the bull.

At another bugle, a uniformed bunch flapped crimson capes and stalked the confused animal, lunging at it with flagged banderillas like the ones Jimmy wore in his hair. Since then, I've learned all

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this pricking and sticking is not so much to make the bull angry as to wound its neck muscles, which lowers the great head for the matador's killing stroke. The moment of truth was near; Don Xavier could have its ears.

Turning away, I found Jimmy on a bench inside the dressing tent. "Here, Jimmy, take this." I thrust a paper cup of coffee at him. "Don't let that pompous fuddy-duddy upset you."

Jimmy peered back at me with eyes that were black pebbles within the white-painted clown discs. "I've got some pride too."

"You're the best, I'm told. Been bull-clowning long?"

"Most of me life."

I pointed to the spikes in his hairdo. "Aren't they a bit heavy for doing somersaults and handsprings? Haven't you got proper Spanish hairpins?"

He giggled, and slurped his coffee. "Barney's got the hairpins. Killer hairpins."

"Were they yours?"

He smiled at me, then sighed with infinite patience. "You sing nice songs, Sheil, but you ask rude questions. Think Barney hasn't seen my señorita act a hundred times? Think he'd miss a switch like that? Think I'm just a stupid black fella, hey?"

"Course not. It's just that Spanish hairpins are an important clue in the murder of that diplomat."

"So let Barney use his big nut. He's the law around here."

"And I'm not? Agreed, Jimmy, but a murder puzzle intrigues me."

I was thinking, however, that his scrawny physique would make it difficult to silently carry an oversized diplomat from hotel bed to torture scene in the bush.

At that moment a louder roar came from the arena, followed by yelling and screaming. Digger charged into the tent.

"Jimmy! Quick! The bull's tossed Xavier!"

The little Aborigine shrugged. "Can't help, mate, sorry. I'm banned. Who invited the stick-nose white bugga anyway?"

"Get out there!" Digger roared, grabbing a frilly shoulder and dragging the tiny fellow upright. "Before he's killed!" He shoved Jimmy towards the bullring.

A stunned hush hovered over the scene. Out there in the dirt, the great matador lay curled in foetal position, while over him stood the deep-chested bull, spiked flags sprouting from its neck and shoulders. The wide horns jabbed and worried at the still object of its wrath.

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Clowns and toreros hopped and scampered in futile panic, trying to distract the animal with shouts, gestures, barbs, and cheeky advances, but its concentration remained fixed on the man beneath its mighty head.

The bull, with hide of battleship grey, was a monster which had been trapped on the wild plains.

"Biggest and meanest brute I've ever seen," muttered Digger as we watched Jimmy sprint into the mêlée. "Half Brahman, half buffalo for sure."

It was indeed a creature from a nightmare, trampling the earth, horning at the matador, and snorting bull oaths from a slathering snout.

"Red capes!" I suggested. "The bright colour will lure it away from Don Xavier."

"Nah, that bull is colour-blind like all cattle," Digger said. "Just pray for Jimmy. He's the only hope."

Instead of dancing about the head like the other clowns, Jimmy darted straight for the tail. I saw Spanish skirts flare and the frilled blouse jerk and next moment the giant bull was down, flipped onto its back, hooves pawing the air.

I had witnessed the sensational and was still gaping as Digger stood chortling his delight. "You don't see that very often. Takes a special knack."

"Tai-kwan-do? Judo?"

"Something like that. Been wrestling bulls all his life, has Jimmy."

While the bull sprawled, the toreros and a brave St. John Ambulance man darted in to ease Xavier away to safety, but suddenly the beast was up again, madder than ever, and charging at Jimmy's back. He made a clown face, pretending not to see it, then windmilled his arms and somersaulted out of the way. The crowd cheered.

The mad bull charged again and Jimmy danced with it, luring it towards the holding pen, where alert attendants chose their moment to crash down the securing barriers. An audible mass sigh echoed around the arena.

Jimmy was the hero of the afternoon, having shown the alleged champion some real bullfighting. As the little fellow left the arena again, this time to overwhelming applause, mental darts teased my memory, and their prickly flags repeated the words I'd heard him utter when the crisis broke: "I'm banned. I'm an insult. Who invited that stick-nose white bugga anyway?"

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Yes, and who had invited the slain diplomat? Had it been the touring toreros, or somebody in the town? Somebody like Mayor Bigshit Sullivan, master of the rodeo and bloodstock baron?

Lured to Cattlecreek, the diplomat who was interfering in big deals would be vulnerable, led by the nose to the slaughter.

Before bothering Barney with my brilliant deduction, I went to the shire administration office to check it out and found a lass reading a novel at the counter.

"Town invitation?" she whined vaguely. "It'll be in here somewhere." She dumped a stack of foolscap volumes under my nose. "That's the minutes. You can browse through." Then she returned to her Mills & Boon romance.

The bureaucratic records of local government are a morass, and Cattlecreek was no exception. I plodded through the neatly typed and duplicated sheets of pink and green and yellow and blue and mauve until I felt my eyes must be spinning like that crime-busting willy-willy that had welcomed me to the town.

But I found it! The shire council had invited the Spanish diplomat to attend the rodeo on a motion put by the mayor himself, who had spoken at length in favour of the idea. Yet by no means was it a unanimous decision. Councillor Antonio Espla, a New Australian whose name might, one supposed, guarantee enthusiasm for such a goodwill exercise, had spoken against, terming it a wanton waste of public money. There was enough support for this minority point of view to require a vote.

I sat there staring at the typewritten words. Mayor Sullivan had been eager to have a business enemy in town, and here was the proof of it.

As I ripped out the page and ran from the office, the girl looked up startled, but I'd a feeling she was more interested in the page of torrid happenings beneath her nose.

I kept running to the police station. Barney had to see this. "Barney, Barney! Here's the proof!" I was yelling even before I crashed through the door of his small office next to the town jail.

Barney wasn't there but his work was. Submerged by a flood which burst from wire baskets, files, hinge-clipped reports, and loose puddles of paper, his desk could have been evidence to prove either a lazy man or a much overworked one.

And there, on top of a steel filing cabinet, were the hairpins, side by side, neatly cradled on the folded bloody cape—Exhibits A, B, and C in the murder investigation. Alongside these, glistening from

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a photograph in a stand-up frame, was a family group.

It showed a mid-thirties couple and three children I guessed would be aged around seven, ten, and early teens.

The tight-lipped father was too old, otherwise I might have taken him for Barney. But this likeness caused me to examine the children again. Yes, that teenager could be Barney some years ago: he had the same straight shoulders and bull neck, that cute curl, and the flat eyes. The dark-haired mother, although smiling for the camera, had a face that expressed the battle of life. The background was an ornate plaza with narrow streets and lots of people—it looked like nowhere in Australia.

Never again will I scoff at claims of divine revelation, for at that moment the whole thing ding-beeped me like a video jackpot. And suddenly there was Barney at the door, flat-eyed and grim as his dad in the photograph.

When he spoke, I knew that he knew what I was thinking: "I'm sorry you found that, ma'am."

"Nice family group," I stammered. "Madrid?"

"San Sebastian." Gently he prised the family heirloom from my sweating fingers.

"I wasn't prying," I quavered. "It was up there with the . . . er, the evidence."

"Yair," replied the level voice with all the zest of a log pile. "That and the hairpins. All what's left. My mother wore those pins in her hair. Before they shaved it all off. Before the massacre."

"By the late General Brotat?"

"He's paid for it now." Barney's eyes held just the suggestion of a glint. "He suffered hell—it was my pleasure."

He gripped my elbow as if making an arrest and led me to his office chair. Noting the multicoloured council minutes I was still gripping, he suddenly chuckled.

"That invitation. The mayor agreed to put my suggestion to the shire council. Presented the bastard on a silver plate."

"Gee, that was clever of you," I said with as much flattery as I could muster while my eyes were fixed on the murderous hairpin he was waving before my eyes: Mama's beauty asset, Sonnyboy's implement of grisly torture.

"You Aussies," he said, and he couldn't have sounded more Australian. "You Aussies, you got no pride."

"And you ethnics," I retorted gamely, "you, you . . . well, we never know what we've got among you ethnics."

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"That's true," he agreed flatly. "You never know." Then he jabbed at my eyes with the hairpin and I squealed.

"You wouldn't, you couldn't!" I squeaked. "I've done you no harm."

Macho silence, hunched shoulders, the bull in thought.

"She's right, mate," he agreed at last, and let his breath out in a growling sigh. "But there's one or two other places I've a score to settle."

He took a clean police shirt from a drawer, but instead of packing it for his journey he tied me up and stuffed it in my mouth—an effective gag, believe me.

He kept the skewers, ready like daggers beside his holster, and walked straight out to his patrol car in the street, without so much as another glance or even a humpf.

He took the road south, the one towards Perth. Or maybe he'd cut east lower down and lose himself in an even larger city, like Melbourne or Sydney.

He'd have no problems finding work there, not Barney the born enforcer.

If ever you come across a big cop, slightly flabby, with dark hair, perhaps a cute curl at the front, and flat zombie eyes, try not to offend him. Just discreetly contact the commissioner of police!

Glossary of terms for "The Clue of the Willy-Willy"

barrackers From barrack: to root or jeer (Random House)

brumby riding Wild horse riding

bullybeef Corned beef

middies Medium-sized beer glasses

stubbies Beer bottles

Take a decko Have a look

ute Utility vehicle

willy-willy Severe tropical cyclone (Random House)

wowser Excessively puritanical person (Random House)

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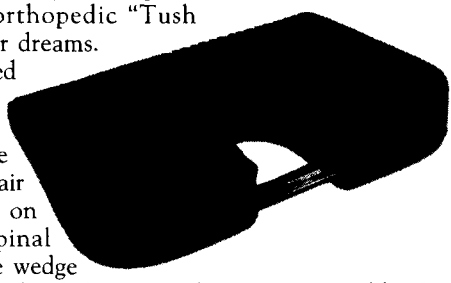

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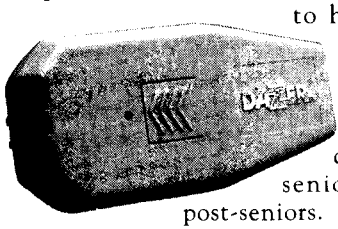

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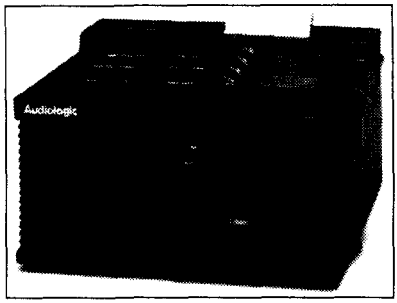

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Veteran writer Helen Tucker makes her first appearance for EQMM *with sixteen books to her credit and a publication list for her short stories and novellas that includes* Ladies Home Journal *and* Redbook. *Ms. Tucker is a former newspaper reporter who now writes full-time from her home in Raleigh, North Carolina. . . .*

FIXED FOR LIFE

by HELEN TUCKER

"Paper or plastic?"

He coulda been a cockroach under the cash register for all the attention she paid him. Some doll! in her red pedal pushers and gray turtleneck sweater. Maybe thirty, give or take. Short straight black hair, combed toward her face. Big eyes, black as her hair, and lashes about a yard long. No makeup but lipstick. No jewelry except a rock a little smaller than a golf ball and a band of little rocks, both on her third finger, left hand. She smelled good, too—good and expensive.

The groceries going across the scanner weren't gonna be paid for with food stamps either. Champagne, three bottles; smoked oysters, a dozen of those little flat cans; fancy-smancy crackers sure as hell not meant for crumbling in soup; several bunches of white grapes . . .

He tried again. "Plastic or paper?"

"What?" She looked at him now, like he was something just in from the back side of Uranus. (That was a good one; have to remember to tell Jase.)

"You want paper or plastic bag, ma'am?"

She smiled a little, like she all of a sudden was on to the fact that standing at the end of the counter was a real live human being just waiting to bag her goddamn groceries.

"Doesn't matter," she said.

So, into the plastic bag . . . while he eyeballed the wallet she pulled out of a gray shoulder bag. Jeez! He knew it like he knew his

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way to Harry's pawn shop! She was loaded. Paid with two C-notes and put the change back in the wallet like it didn't matter whether she even got any back.

Today's score was right here. A chicken just waiting to be plucked. And what a chick!

She held out her hands for the bag of groceries, but he clutched it, saying, "I'll be glad to take this to your car." After checking out the score herself, the next most important thing was to see what kinda wheels she had.

"It isn't heavy," she said with a little laugh. "I didn't buy that much."

"Don't mind taking it, ma'am. Glad to do it." He headed for the automatic door, giving the high sign to Jase, who was bagging two counters away, to cover for him. He and Jase had become partners about a year ago in what had turned out to be a very profitable business. Ver-ree profitable!

Outside, she led the way across the parking lot to a baby-blue Coupe de Ville. Yeah, man, this was it! Probably be his best score of the week, maybe even the month or year!

As he put the bag on the floor of the front seat, where she indicated, she reached into the shoulder bag, pulled out the wallet again, and held out two quarters.

"No, ma'am," he said quickly. "We don't take tips."

She looked down at the quarters like they'd turned into something dirty all of a sudden, then put them back in the change side of the wallet. "Well, thank you," she said, and this time she gave him a real smile.

"You must be having a party," he ventured.

"What? Oh no. It's an anniversary, just a quiet little celebration. Private, you know? Our first anniversary."

"Congratulations!"

She smiled again, looking out over the lot like she already had something—or somebody—else on her mind. Then she got in the car and pulled out while he ran for the old Chevy parked on the far side of the lot near the street. His own wheels needed a new hose, so he'd borrowed his uncle's heap for the day, the heap that was almost as old as he was and had a gutted muffler. Sounded like a goddamn 747 revving up when it started and was just about as loud when it was running.

He kept the blue Caddy in sight, but stayed far enough behind so she wouldn't notice him. He knew she wouldn't be going far; if she

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lived a long way off, she'da been shopping at a grocery nearer home.

Yeah, business had been good lately. Three scores last week and this was the second this week and today was only Wednesday. Mentally, he patted himself on the back. He was some goddamn inventive businessman! He'd thought up this enterprise all by himself. The idea hit him one day right out of the blue while he was bagging groceries for a fat broad wearing a full-length fur coat and dripping in ice. Diamond rings on both hands, little diamond studs in her ears, and a watch with diamonds around the face and on the band.

She's just asking to get ripped off, was his first thought. And the second was, Well, why not?

He'd tried to read the address off the credit card she handed the checker, but it was too far off. She had a whole cart full of groceries, so he pushed the cart out to her car, Lincoln Town Car he noticed right off, and unloaded them. That was when he got the neat idea of following her to see where she lived. And that night he went back to her house . . .

It all worked out so well that the following week he did the same thing again. Another rich woman, another good score.

After that, he started noticing the women, every detail about them, as they checked out. Now he was an authority on which ones were loaded and which only wanted you to think they were and which really didn't give a damn. He had found out, to his amazement, that sometimes the tackiest, sloppiest dressed were the richest. Then it dawned on him that if they were poor, they wouldn't have the guts to go out in public dressed like that. When you're rich, it makes no difference how you look as long as everybody knows you're rich. You can do what you want to, say what you want to, and dress like you want to.

The business was going along smooth as satin until one day the store manager called him aside and asked why he was outside so long. "Shouldn't take you twenty or thirty minutes just to put a few bags of groceries in a car," he said, his eyes magnified behind his gold-rimmed glasses.

"Sometimes the customers ask me to do little things for them," he had said, trying to think what kind of goddamn little things a customer might ask. "Like changing the groceries from one bag to another, or taking out something that's thawing and leaking."

"Well you get yourself back in here P.D.Q. or you can be replaced," the manager said. "We're having to take the bagger off another counter to cover yours."

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(Jeezuss! Nobody said P.D.Q. anymore. What century was that nerd out of?)

That was when he had let Jase in on what he was doing so that when he was outside, Jase could cover his counter for him. For payment, he gave Jase a percentage of the take.

It had worked out just great for both of them. No more trouble from the manager, Jase was happy, and he was . . . (he couldn't even think of a word to describe how great he felt). He had enough money now to pay his uncle a little something for the room he'd lived in since his old man kicked off, he had a good (used) car, and he had money to throw around on any goddamn thing he wanted. Only thing was, if he was smart enough to think up this scam, he oughta be smart enough to think up something even better that would bring in more bread.

He was working on that as he drove along, following the blue Caddy. He kept the car in sight, but stayed far enough behind so she wouldn't notice him.

She drove down St. Mary's Street to Fairview and turned left. Yeah, man! The high property-tax district. She turned in the driveway of a big three-story stone house that had a lot of shrubbery around it and a lawn that was so green and evenly cut that it didn't look for real. The house, the car, and the woman all went together like ice cream and cake, money and good times.

He drove to the end of the block, turned around, and headed back to the store. Tonight he'd be right here, helping that chick and her husband celebrate their first anniversary. He just about laughed his goddamn head off thinking about it.

The way the gravel in the circular driveway in the backyard crunched under the tires always made her flinch. It had the same effect as scraping a fingernail along a blackboard. Unless she had groceries, she usually parked under the porte-cochère at the side of the house.

Picking up the plastic bag—why hadn't she asked for paper?—she went to the back door, unlocked it, and went in. She had given the housekeeper a few days off, as she always did when Charles was out of town. No need having servants around just to wait on her. No need having them around for several other reasons, too.

She smiled, thinking of the other reasons.

In the large kitchen, she began to unload the bag and her mind went back to that strange boy at the store. She hadn't noticed him

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at first until she saw that he was staring at her. Nothing unusual in that; men usually stared at her, men of all ages.

He had scraggly brown hair, a few strands of which fell into his foxlike face. His eyes were small, or did they just seem small because he was squinting? He was slope-shouldered, and his posture wasn't the best, but he was certainly better dressed than the other bag boys, most of whom wore faded and ragged jeans. This boy wore neat gray pants and a shirt which looked like silk, though surely wasn't. And he was well mannered. Maybe seventeen or eighteen, though he looked younger because he was small-framed.

She saw him glance furtively at her wedding and engagement rings, look quickly away, then stare openly. She almost laughed at his reaction. It had been much the same as hers the night Charles had given her the engagement ring, the night she had thought was the happiest of her life. Amazing how time changes things. There was no doubt in her mind that tonight would be the best, at least up to now.

She had ended a bad (no, not really bad, but boring, boring, boring) marriage the week before she met Charles. Ned, her first husband, whom she had married during her sophomore year at college (primarily so she could become a dropout), had been an insurance salesman who had intrigued her when she met him because he offered an alternative to sitting in dull, dreary classes and taking exams on which she never did very well anyway. They were married three months after their first date.

And within another three months she realized she had done what her mother always had warned against: jumped from the frying pan into the fire. In comparison with Ned, college had been a blast. They had an apartment where she was expected to stay all day doing housewifely things. He came home at night bubbling over with information about how many policies he had sold that day, or else dejectedly telling her why he had missed out on a couple of sales. The highlights of their marriage were two company banquets!

She had stood this existence for a year and a half, then one day she had simply walked out the door, vowing never to return. But she did return, immediately. By the time she had reached the corner, she knew she didn't want to leave her belongings. Her clothes and other things were more important to her than letting Ned think she had been abducted or that something else dire had happened to her and then laughing at his reaction. So she went

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back, packed her things, wrote a note telling him goodbye forever, called a cab this time, and left.

She went to her mother's house on the other side of the city and waited for Ned to appear, promise her anything she wanted if only she'd go back to him, and, in the words of ancient novels, "sweep her off her feet."

Ned never came. He got in touch with her through a divorce lawyer and that was that. Six months later, the divorce was final. His agreeableness in ending it all so painlessly, so apparently without regret of any kind, frayed her ego around the edges a little, but she kept that to herself and soon, by rationalization, she visualized Ned as simply too depressed and forlorn to trust himself to see her again.

She moved into a small apartment of her own near the downtown section (which ostensibly was being "revitalized," the word used by the Chamber of Commerce), took a job as receptionist and chief phone answerer at a radio station, and with the small amount of alimony from Ned, she managed. Marginally.

The week after the divorce, she had gone with three of her coworkers to a nearby bar after work and there she had seen Charles. He was alone, standing at the bar, engaged in an animated conversation with the bartender. She thought him the most distinguished-looking man she'd ever seen, with his dark hair graying at the temples, his impressive build, his expensively tailored suit and paisley tie. His face was tanned as though he had just returned from a holiday at some exotic place.

She went to the bar and stood beside him, waiting, as though to get the bartender's attention. Reaching out toward a bowl of peanuts, she intentionally turned over the man's drink.

Gasping, she began abject apologies, using a paper napkin to rub his jacket where the drink had splashed. "Oh, I am *so* sorry," she said again and again. "Nick," to the bartender, "please give this gentleman another drink. I'll pay, of course. And I'll have the jacket cleaned also."

The man smiled at her, shook his head no, then turned back to Nick, but she would not leave it there. "I insist," she insisted. "Please, won't you let me make up for my carelessness? Do come over to a booth and have a drink with me."

She led him to an empty booth, knowing full well that the eyes of her deserted companions were on her. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered but getting to know this man.

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Charles Corbin was, as he said, a "set finder." He went around the country looking for the perfect setting for a particular movie or TV show. "I take some of the credit for discovering this state," he told her. "Did you know, next to Hollywood, more movies are shot here than anywhere else. This state has everything . . . mountains, seashore, whatever one wants is right here. In fact, I've moved here permanently from the Coast, but I still go back out there at regular intervals."

He was not married. He had been, but his wife had died five years earlier and he had "never taken time to look for a replacement . . . not that Janet could be replaced."

She took his words seriously at first, knowing he meant them as a warning to her. Yet because he had looked at her speculatively as he said it, she knew he was not a hopeless cause.

She was almost twenty-two, he was forty. But the difference in age, instead of discouraging her, made him that much more attractive to her, and she was sure it had the same effect on him.

She saw him often, making no secret of her interest in him, her feelings for him. But she steadfastly refused to go on trips with him at his invitation, never let him stay overnight at her apartment, and for all intents and purposes acted like the primmest and most proper of virgins, which he believed her to be since she had not told him about Ned.

She knew exactly what she was doing. Her actions (or lack thereof) not only whetted his curiosity but also his appetite for her. They were married within four months, and for a wedding present, he bought her the big stone house on Fairview Road.

Life with Charles definitely was not boring, at least not at first. He took her with him looking for sites, he had parties entertaining stars when movies were being filmed in the vicinity (there had been that glorious party for Gregory Peck and Lauren Bacall when they were filming right here in town). For at least a couple of years, she felt she had found her element and was living in it.

Then slowly, so gradually that she hardly noticed at first, it all became routine. The stars were only people, after all, and people were all alike once you got to know them, all falling into certain categories and types. The trips to the West Coast with Charles became tiresome, actually more trouble than they yielded in enjoyment, and even Charles himself seemed more predictable and less interesting every day.

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But it was a case of familiarity breeding boredom, not contempt. She was most assuredly not contemptuous of Charles's money and all it bought for her. She would never walk out on *him*. No way! And he adored her, thought her perfection, loved her to distraction; she was sure of that. She would never, in any way, let him know that her life with him wasn't the flawless utopia she pretended it was.

Just as she would never let him know about Doug.

He knew Doug, of course, because Doug lived next door. But he didn't know *about* Doug. Doug was only two years older than she, but bad luck had made him seem and look older. His wife, Alicia, was an invalid, a diabetic who was in and out of the hospital (usually in) with amazing regularity. All of which left Doug alone and lonely. Often, he would wander over to talk to her and Charles, and when Charles was away, just her.

He had piercing blue eyes and dark blond curly hair and would have been handsome except that his face was pockmarked, as though ravaged by acne earlier. What first attracted her to him was the way he looked at her, his hunger as plain as though he wore a sign.

One year ago tonight, that hunger had been sated. Charles was on one of his trips to the Coast and Alicia was in the hospital. Doug came over after supper and left just before the cook and housekeeper arrived the next morning. (Thereafter, when Charles was away, she gave the servants time off.)

Tonight she and Doug would celebrate their first "love" anniversary.

She put away the last of the groceries, still smiling at the thought that the bag boy probably thought she would be having that "quiet little celebration" with her husband—good old dependably dull Charles, who was more interested in property and houses and whether settings went with a story than he was in his own wife.

She went to the dining room and took the silver wine cooler out of the sideboard. She'd use that for the champagne, have it on the bedside table. But it was tarnished, so she took it back to the kitchen to polish it. Everything must be perfect for tonight, absolutely perfect.

The phone on the counter rang as she was looking for the silver polish.

"Hello."

"That you, baby?"

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God, she wished he wouldn't always call her baby. It made her feel like either a stupid infant or an old man's darling. "Of course, Charles," she said lightly. "Whom were you expecting to answer, Julia Roberts?"

He laughed heartily as though she had made a priceless remark. "Thought maybe Mrs. Tanner would. She usually does. Listen, baby, I've got good news."

"Don't tell me, let me guess. They've given you six new pictures to find a location for."

"Better than that—uh, I do have some new pictures to locate, but I finished up here sooner than I thought I would, so I'll be home earlier."

"Earlier than tomorrow night?" Her heart dropped like a cement slab.

"I'm taking the red-eye and I'll be in at eight o'clock tomorrow morning. Don't bother to meet me though. I'll take a cab home."

"Fine," she said. It wasn't as bad as she had thought; she and Doug could still have their celebration tonight. Then, because he might have thought her lacking in enthusiasm, she said brightly, "Can't wait, Charles. Hurry every chance you get." She made a loud smacking kiss noise into the phone.

"I love you, baby," he said.

"Likewise," she said, and they hung up at the same time.

She called Doug's office instantly and drummed her fingers nervously on the counter while she waited for the call to be put through to him.

"Yes?" he said curtly. "This is Douglas Partin."

"It's me," she said. "Listen, we have a teeny-weeny problem. Charles is coming in tomorrow morning instead of tomorrow night. You'll have to leave by seven."

"That's not so bad," he said. "I was afraid you were going to say tonight was off."

"No way. See you at nine, or thereabouts."

"Maybe I'll come over a little earlier."

"The sooner the better."

She hummed to herself as she polished the wine cooler. Tonight promised to be the best first anniversary she'd ever had, because she could enjoy it with the knowledge that she had the best of *all* possible worlds simultaneously.

* * *

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He wore his business suit: black jeans, black sweater, and in his little handy-dandy tool kit he had a black stocking. He blended in with the night like bats and black cats. Everything was cool except the goddamn car with its goddamn gutted muffler. Tomorrow he'd get his own wheels back and tell his uncle to fix this heap so it wouldn't sound like some half-assed fire engine roaring down the street.

He turned onto Fairview and slowed the car, squinting at the houses. Hers was in the second block, set back from the street and, wouldn't you know, there was a streetlight right beside the driveway . . . which meant he had to park farther away from the house than he'd planned. Damn nuisance having to carry stuff that far.

He looked up and down the street before getting out of the car. It was nearly midnight and no one was in sight. For sure, he hardly expected people to be out jogging in the middle of a cold October night. Clutching the little tool box, he looked both ways once again, then went down the driveway to the side of the house.

When he'd first started out in the business, he'd worried about alarms and such. No more, except in summer when he couldn't always use his chosen access (which it had been a stroke of genius to discover). In hot weather, when air conditioners were running, he'd had to waste time looking for the main electrical lines to a house to cut off the alarms, but in cooler weather, all he had to do was find an entrance to the basement or crawlspace.

Which was what he did right now with his penlight playing over the lower wall of the house. Nothing on the side. In the back, the first thing he noticed was a light shining from a window on the second floor. Bedroom. The mister and his lady were up there celebrating like crazy. He grinned, imagining what it would be like to "celebrate" with that chick. Too bad it couldn't be arranged. But not tonight.

There was a little screened porch in the very back of the house and right beside that was a square door, about three feet high. The entrance to the crawlspace. No lock, just a simple hook and eye.

He was under the house instantly, shining the light around. Yeah, there it was, right over there: the base of the air-conditioning unit. Scrunched up, he went to it, opened his tool kit, and in two secs had the side off.

All he had to do now was crawl up to the first floor, unscrew a few bolts, and, presto, he would be inside the house. That took almost eight minutes, and then he emerged in a coat closet. Quietly opening

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the closet door, he found himself in a long hall that ran from the front door to the back of the house, presumably the kitchen. The next thing was to disconnect the alarm so he could go out through a door and not the a.c. unit. He went to the front door and looked at the panel of switches. The alarm system was right beneath the panel, but it obviously wasn't on.

Damn Sam! They were in such a hurry to get upstairs they hadn't even thought to put on the alarm. Even the front door was unlocked. He could have walked right in and helped himself to everything in sight. Too bad he hadn't brought a truck instead of his uncle's goddamn heap.

With his penlight pointed straight ahead, he surveyed all the rooms downstairs. Then he went back to make his collection. There was a TV, one of those console things big as a railroad car, which he couldn't manage, but also a VCR and camcorder, which he certainly could manage. He took them to the front door and set them down. Then he went back to the dining room where he picked up a silver chest with enough flat silver to accommodate the Chinese army. It was heavy as hell, but he got it to the front door. In the dining room again, he got some odd silver pieces: a pitcher, a tea service, and three trays.

Back at the front door, he decided he'd better get this stuff in the car before looking for more. It took him three trips. He was very careful to look both ways each time before approaching the car.

What he had already was worth more money than he could make in a lifetime of working, even considering Harry's deflated dollar at the pawn shop. He could leave now, no sweat. But there was something else he wanted, something that had been on his mind ever since he'd seen the woman this morning in the store. Those rocks on her hand. With those, he could retire and never do a goddamn thing for the rest of his life, except what he wanted to do.

No more bagging groceries or looking for other odd jobs, no more arguments with his uncle about going back to school so he wouldn't turn out to be like his no-good old man, no more scrimping and saving just to buy a used car and keep it running. He'd be king of the goddamn world.

Yeah, he had to have those rocks!

He took three items out of his tool kit: a pretty little snub-nose pistol, the black stocking, and two long, strong cords. He pulled the stocking over his head and went slowly up the carpeted stairs, staying as close as possible to the banister in case there were squeaking

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steps. At the top of the stairs, he heard them talking. First there was a low, throaty laugh from her, then she said, "We could just stay awake all night and that way you wouldn't miss curfew."

Curfew? What the hell was that?

The husband laughed then and said, "You're wearing me out."

"I thought it was the other way around," she said. "Anyway, tonight's special. How often does one have a first anniversary?"

He stepped just inside the door and looked around the biggest bedroom (with the biggest bed) he'd ever seen. Beside the bed was a silver bucket with a bottle of champagne in it, and in the bed were the woman and her husband, both naked as jaybirds, holding on to each other like they were going down in quicksand. They hadn't seen or heard him.

Pointing the gun right at them, he said in a low, guttural voice, "Won't interrupt but a minute or two. Just gimme those rings."

The man jumped and sat up, staring at him, and the woman screamed, pulled the sheet over her, and then was quiet. After that, neither of them uttered a sound except for the noise of their raspy breathing.

There was a phone on a bedside table. He went over and jerked the line out of the wall, all the while keeping the little snub-nosed beauty aimed at the pair. "Hand me those rings or I'll use this," he said.

"Please, please don't hurt us," the woman said. She looked at her left hand and then at the gun. Slowly, her right hand trembling, she took off the rings. Cupping them in her palm, she said, "Couldn't I just write you a check and keep my rings?"

He laughed like hell. Jeezuss! What kind of idiot nerd did she take him for? He held out his hand. "The rings!"

She gave them up. "Now will you go?"

"Yes, go," her husband spoke for the first time.

"I will, I will." But first there was something he had to do. He took the cord out of his pocket. "Tell you what, I'll tie you up together so you can still make with the lovey-dovey."

And he did. He tied their hands behind them individually, then tied their upper torsos together at the top so they were facing each other in bed. Then he tied their feet together.

"Don't do this, please don't do this," the woman pleaded, sounding like she was about to let fly with a waterfall of tears.

"Listen, I'll make it worth your while if you'll untie us," her husband said. "We won't call the police, I promise, and I'll get money for you, whatever amount you say."

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Still thought he was some kind of stupid fool, did they? He put the rings in his pocket, said, "Happy anniversary," and as he left the room he heard the woman say to her husband, "My God, we'll be murdered. Murdered, I tell you!"

He bounded down the stairs. Dumb broad. Didn't she know if he was going to ice them he'da done it right off? Anyhow, there'd be a servant or two coming in who'd find them, so they sure as hell wouldn't starve.

He let himself out the front door, went to the street, and unlocked the car, glancing at the backseat full of treasures. Those, plus the two rings, made this the score of a lifetime. He remembered his old man always talking about some scheme or scam that would leave him "fixed for life." It never happened, but he, himself, had done it. Man, had he ever done it! Fixed for life was exactly what he was.

He revved up the goddamn 747 and drove away from Fairview Road. Just wait till old Harry the Pawn got a gander at the backseat. What a haul!

He hardly noticed when a blue and white car pulled away from the curb as he turned into Glenwood, but the blue light that began twirling in his rearview mirror got his attention. *A cop car!* What the hell! He wasn't speeding or anything. Why the hell would a cop want to stop him?

The muffler, the goddamn gutted muffler! It was against the law. In his own car he could outrun any cop car in the city, but in this heap he couldn't beat a horse and buggy in a race fixed in his favor.

With tears welling in his eyes and a mournful look at the treasure-laden backseat, he pulled over to the curb.

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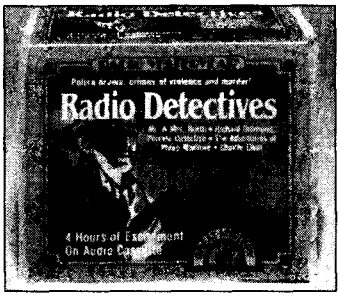

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HENRY SLESAR

Henry Slesar has been contributing stories to EQMM *since 1956. During most of that time, he has also been a writer for television, with credits that include scripts for* Alfred Hitchcock Presents, The Man from Uncle, *and* The Name of the Game. *Those who followed television's* The Edge of Night *have seen Mr. Slesar's mystery-writing talents at work many times, for as a script-writer for the series he created the murder and suspense plots that set it apart from other daytime dramas. We're happy to have him put those skills to work for us in a story with a very contemporary theme . . .*

HAPPEN TO ANYONE

by HENRY SLESAR

TO: J. M. Schroeder, Coordinating Director
Committee for the Homeless
New York Chapter

Dear Jerry,

This fax isn't meant to substitute for the official memo I'll be sending your office, as you so clearly demand in that adorable little "operations manual" you distributed to all us peons on the street. I just thought you'd like to see this report on a case that intrigued us so much last year—or was it year before last?—concerning the notorious "Tiger" affair. I'm sure you remember "Tiger" only too well, and all the damage control the matter required. Indeed, you almost believed it might put the committee out of business, if only because of the

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precipitous drop in donations. But—here we are, although I'm sure you're still just as worried about our funding as ever. Anyway, the story I have to tell you comes directly from Ryan, my hardworking journalist husband, and when he called me about it this morning, my mouth fell open so far I bruised my chin on the floor. I thought you'd want to know about it as soon as possible, especially since I believe that it's the most dramatic demonstration yet of the first principle of your manual, the one that reads:

> ***"The important thing to remember is that Homelessness is a condition that can happen to anyone."***

At eleven that morning, half of the Overhang people were still asleep. The sun was bouncing shafts of light off the windows of the UN building, and there were jackhammers tearing up York Avenue, but they slept on, huddled in dirty brown wrappers, blankets distributed by the missions, some of them quilted against the cold although winter was only a memory. It was the first day of June, a day like the rest of them, better slept away.

The architects who had designed the street-level overhang never dreamed of the shelter it would provide the homeless. Their finely rendered elevations featured sketches of elegant people strolling past shop windows and restaurants, safe from showers and sun. The shops and restaurants were there, but so was a campsite constructed of cardboard shipping cartons, rags and refuse, borrowed supermarket carts, wire trash containers blackened by fires lit for warmth or alfresco dining. The shopkeepers and restaurant owners of the street level had filed bitter complaints with the police, and there were periodic sweeps that lasted only days before the homeless were back, their mute appeal for compassion too strong for the city to overcome. The city sighed and shrugged, and the homeless continued to sleep under the shelter of the overhang.

One of them wasn't asleep, however. Tiger was awake. Tiger was up to his old tricks, growling and cursing under his breath, making unintelligible threats to the army of invisible enemies who always seemed to surround him. Even some of the deepest sleepers of the Overhang began to stir as Tiger began his matins of anger and hatred.

It had been a black day for the Overhang people when Tiger had joined their ranks only ten days ago. There were no rules in their

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community, no bylaws, no leaders, only an unspoken understanding of their mutual dependency. Even Looseteeth, the schizophrenic lady, had curbed her appalling hygienic habits for the sake of the others. Big Guy, the black ex-wrestler, found himself in charge of law and order by default, at least when he wasn't staring-drunk on muscatel. Preacher, the oldest among them, made himself shepherd of their souls, but smiled and walked away if his message was unwelcome. The rest had no names, unless they were pinned on them, which was how the newcomer became Tiger.

He was young for a derelict. Under his scraggly beard, there were youthful contours. His hair was matted and filthy, but there was a lot of it, almost as long as Looseteeth's. His clothes were so ragged they would have been discarded by the least-demanding thrift shops: two torn T-shirts worn at the same time, a canvas jacket stiff with dirt, jeans to match. Nobody cared about how Tiger looked, but his behavior was something else. Tiger growled at the citizens, especially the females. Sometimes he roared at them. Once, he had lunged at a passerby, and the frightened woman had reported the "assault" to the police. A uniformed officer arrived at the Overhang, and Big Guy, with the dignity of his office, had defended Tiger, minimizing the incident.

Tiger had shown no gratitude. Two days later, he made a lewd remark to a young woman walking by. When she ignored him, he followed her down the street, cursing and threatening her, and this time Big Guy turned his back when two cops showed up and put handcuffs on Tiger. They ducked his head into the back of a squad car and drove him away, but he was back the next night, only slightly subdued by his experience. And when he woke up the next morning, swearing at his invisible foes, it was obvious now that some of his demons wore blue.

It was the first of June, and Tiger was awake, the sun from the UN windows glaring in his eyes. It had been a week since his arrest, since a bored judge had dismissed him as just one more street crazy, one more piece of detritus dumped on the populace by wrongheaded officials of the mental health establishment. Only a week, but he was already eyeing the young woman walking towards them, the cashier of an Overhang restaurant called Ferdie's which opened at noon. She was in her June first attire, her coat thinner, her skirt shorter. When she saw Tiger swaying in her path the eyes she had trained never to look at the homeless army camped at her doorstep looked into his and widened with the fear of what she saw in them.

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"Bitch!" Tiger shouted suddenly. *"Bitch!"* he screamed. "Bitch, you bitch, you dirty filthy bitch!"

She was too frightened to make a sound or even to remember her destination. She turned and fled down the street the way she came, and Tiger cupped his hands over his mouth to bellow after her:

"Don't come back! I'll kill you, you come back, you hear me, bitch?"

They were all awake now, the Overhang community, picking up their heads from makeshift pillows, staring at him, resenting the disturbance of their sleep, their dreaming lives.

Tiger calmed down. The tension went out of his shoulders and arms. He turned to give them all one backward glance, his eyes carrying no message at all. Then he walked away.

It was the first of June, and time to go home.

He made his way slowly downtown. Nobody saw him because nobody wanted to see him. He was invisible, and therefore invulnerable. He had to force himself to stifle his feelings of power; he couldn't become careless, incautious.

He walked and walked until the day wore itself out. He bought a chili dog from a street vendor, stuffing it into his mouth on a playground bench. The sun went down, adding new power to his cloak of invisibility.

When he reached the brownstone, only three blocks and a right turn from the Overhang, there were few people on the street, nobody even close to the ground-floor entrance. He took the small silver key from his pocket, canvassed the street once more, and decided that all was safe. He slipped the key into the lock and turned it in one smooth motion. The door opened and he was inside. The relief! He wanted to shout it, sing it. Instead, he just breathed in the sweet familiar darkness, savoring it before it would be dispelled by the touch of his hand on the light switch.

Click. The Modigliani print he hated was illuminated, the long-necked lady simpering at him. There were so many letters in the mailbox that the postman had stacked the excess on the floor. He brought the mail inside, unable to suppress the usual quickened little heartbeat of hope.

He switched on the lights and stood for a long moment to absorb the living room Brucie had taken three years of their marriage to design. All her ideas had been stolen directly from the Kip's Bay designer shows. Oriental rugs with Art Deco furniture. Track lighting and Japanese prints. Nothing seemed to fit. He hated the room

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more than the Modigliani, almost more than Brucie herself.

He hurled himself on the tan leather sofa, and flipped through the mail. There were only two letters of interest, one for Brucie from her old college sorority, one from the Lois Wellman Agency. He tore that one open quickly, his pulse racing, but it was only a notice of termination of the residual schedule from the soft-drink commercial he had made the previous year. All the rest were bills, junk mail, dental appointment reminders, pleas for charity. Charity! He had to laugh, rubbing his hand over his filthy, scraggly beard.

He went into the bathroom, the two-sink bathroom Brucie had spent her last birthday money decorating despite his protest ("Fifteen *thousand* dollars!" he had shouted at her. "We could go someplace, we could skip the damned winter, we could lie on a beach for three months . . ."). He hated to remember what she had said about him in response, the bitter, demeaning answer, all the more infuriating for being true.

In the brightly lit mirror, the image of Tiger was startling even to the man who had created him. He began to strip off his clothes, every last dirt-caked, tattered shred. In this white marble and porcelain ambience they filled him with so much revulsion that he was tempted to trash them. That would be a terrible mistake, of course; the clothes made the man called Tiger, and Tiger had to be preserved for next time, that all-important next time.

He spent fifteen minutes in the shower, soaping himself a dozen times, and was still not sure the accumulated sweat and grime were gone. The mirror steamed over when he started to shave, even when he opened the bathroom door to let in the air. He was looking forward to this shave, to luxuriating in the process, but as the cool sharp blade touched his sideburn, he caught his breath and stopped just in time. The beard had to stay. He could only wash his face vigorously, then slap aftershave lotion over the bristles that still remained. It was less than satisfying, but it had to do. He moved closer to the mirror to search for the thin, handsome face he was accustomed to seeing there, a "young Kirk Douglas" he always imagined producers saying. "Looks ten, talent three" he once read on a casting director's note sheet, and he had been so pleased by the "ten" he hadn't minded the "three," even if it cost him the part, and the next one, and the one after that. He looked past the bristly beard and smiled and said:

"So long, Tiger!"

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In slacks and a pale green sport shirt, he completed the rest of his chores. In the small leather suitcase he had used only once, on their honeymoon five years ago, he stuffed Tiger's evil-smelling clothes, wondering if the T. Anthony shop that sold it had ever imagined their luggage carrying such garments. Then he made himself a drink, called the airline, and verified the ETA of Brucie's flight from L.A. It was the red-eye, of course; she wouldn't be at the apartment until seven the next morning. He smiled at the thought of the sweet night's sleep ahead of him. In a bed, a real bed, with soft cotton sheets, a satiny blanket, a plump white pillow under his head. The sight of it made him want to call Kath, but she was probably as steamed as the bathroom right now. He hadn't spoken to Kath once since his wife left for California, and the last time they were together she had sounded exactly like Brucie, just as mean, just as bitchy. *Bitch, bitch, bitch,* he chuckled to himself, remembering that bit of street theater earlier in the day. It had felt good, it had felt right, it would have earned him the nod from any producer, any casting director. *Looks ten, talent ten.*

A clang woke him up. It was Brucie's silver-backed hairbrush ringing against the glass surface of her Art Deco dressing table. He opened one eye and saw the back of her head, the bobbing blond hairdo stolen from an old Doris Day movie. In the mirror, the glare of her eyes was as fierce as the lights in the UN windows.

"Sleeping Beauty wakes," she said coldly. But when he lifted his head from the pillow, she made a raspy noise in her throat. "I take back the 'Beauty.' What's that stuff all over your face?"

"It's called a beard," he said, sitting up. "I started growing it just before you left, remember?"

"No," Brucie said. She went to the doorway where two pieces of Vuitton luggage waited to be disgorged. "I thought you'd just decided not to shave, the way you decided not to take any more auditions. Or does this mean you have a job?"

He grinned, locking his hands behind his head. "Shakespeare, Richard the Fifth or Henry the Third, one of them numbered jobbies . . . Shakespeare in the Park. And you said I *mumble*. Would they hire a mumbler for Shakespeare?"

She paused in the act of spinning the combination lock and looked at him speculatively. Then she went back to it.

"For ten seconds I almost believed you."

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"Hey, is that nice?" He threw the covers aside. He was wearing the yellow silk pajamas she had bought him on their second wedding anniversary. On the third, Brucie, a script girl often in demand, was in Colorado working on a ski movie. On the fourth, they weren't speaking.

She noticed the pajamas and made a face.

"You must have had company last night."

"Who, me? You know I always go to *her* place." He grinned, but the grin was less charming buried in bristle.

"Very funny," Brucie said.

"And true," he wanted to reply. Instead, he said, "Well, tell me about the trip. How's the script look? Did you like that new director? Is this going to be just a movie or a fil-um?"

"It's a turkey trying to be a disaster. It took us the whole two weeks to shoot the department store scene. They looked at the rushes and decided to do them all over again back East."

"Hey, that's good news. You get to stay home for a change."

"Then there's the bad news. I get to stay home for a change."

It was time to make a move. He got off the bed and came to her at the closet. He took the Sonia Rykiel dress from her hands and put his arm around her waist.

"Look, I'm sorry about what happened. I meant to be home when you left. I was chasing this wild goose. My old buddy Stanley Gabler, the hotshot Broadway producer, it was my one and only chance to see him."

"Is that how you got to play Richard the Eighth?"

"No, Stanley's project is a musical; he was scouting theaters. There wasn't anything for me unless I took singing lessons in a hurry."

"I've heard you in the shower," Brucie said. "Don't waste your money." He tried to kiss her, but she shoved him away. "Don't stick that hairy mess in my face," she said, snatching back the dress. "And I don't give a damn about your not seeing me off. I was just as glad. Daddy took me to the airport. He was delighted that you weren't around."

His heart rhythm doubled up again.

"Did you get a chance to speak to him. About the project?"

"He knows all about it. He got your letter, didn't he? Your letter and that script and that neat little budget. I told you what he said."

"He said he didn't know *how* to read a script. He asked you to read it for him." When she didn't reply, he felt the bile of anger

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rising into his throat. "You told me you liked the script, that it was a good part for me if I could get it! Didn't you tell me that, Brucie?"

"God, you've got a lousy memory, Danny. How do you ever remember lines? Not that you've ever had any lines."

Bitch! raved Tiger within him.

"Well, what did you say? You tell me!"

"I said the script was okay! That it would make a decent TV movie. I said your friend Howie had a little talent. But he's still a beginner, he's nobody. Even if he found a producer he wouldn't have the clout to get you the lead."

"Your father has clout," he said tightly. "Your daddy has money, and money is *clout*. He could have insisted that I have the part. It's done all the time, snookyface. You work in this business, you know how it works! Why didn't you tell him that?"

"Because it's his money," Brucie said. She shoved the two empty suitcases in the back of the closet. "I don't want to see him throw it away. And that's what he'd be doing, investing in an okay script and a bad actor."

It was too harsh even for Brucie, and she turned to him quickly, her eyes softer and mistier, a lot like the eyes of the girl who saw him in a TV studio six years ago and thought she had come to the beginning and the end of her love story.

"I'm sorry, Danny, I meant the part wasn't right for *you*. Only a few actors can play against type: De Niro, maybe, Al Pacino. Not you, Danny. You like to play yourself, and that's okay. It works for plenty of people. That's how I explained it to Daddy, that's why he's not going to do your project. But he had another idea."

"What was it?"

"You know what it was. He said he'd still take you into the business. He isn't insisting on starting in the plant. He's willing to make a place for you in the office."

"The office, the office!" Danny gasped. "It smells like a morgue even in the office, I've been there!"

"You don't even notice the chemical smells after a few months, that's what everybody says. . . . He'll pay you six hundred a week. That's six hundred dollars more than you earned last year. Don't turn away!"

"I don't want to hear any more. I've heard it too often."

"Here's something you haven't heard. The free ride is over, Danny. I can't go on being the breadwinner in this family, I don't make

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that much bread. . . ." She sighed. "Look, we'll talk about this later, okay?"

"When?"

"Not now. I need a quick nap; I didn't get much sleep on the plane. And I've got a million things to do this afternoon."

"Dinner," he said. "How about dinner?"

"Yes," Brucie said. "Dinner is fine, I couldn't cook a damned thing tonight anyway. . . . Where do you want to go? The usual?"

"No," he said. "I want to try something different. There's a restaurant called Ferdie's. Somebody told me it's good, Stanley Gabler, I think it was."

"I never heard of it."

"It's on York Avenue," he said. "Just three blocks from here. Only I'll have to meet you there, okay? I've got an audition this afternoon, the Shakespeare thing." He rubbed his beard and smiled. "I've got a good feeling about it, Brucie . . . I think it's going to change things for me. I'm right for this part, just right for it."

Preacher was gone, having worked the Overhang crowd long enough and made no converts. Looseteeth was still there, only there was something wrong with her, she wouldn't get out of her sleeping bag, she just lay there and moaned. Big Guy must have been scavenging the trash receptacles all day. He had a garbage bag full of discarded cans and bottles. In the morning, he would take them to the supermarket and convert them into nickels. Two newcomers to the Overhang were eyeing his collection with greedy eyes, but they would never challenge Big Guy's massive shoulders. If they had, the reward for their crime would have been less than three dollars.

Nobody greeted Tiger when he arrived, but somebody had moved in on the space he usually occupied. Moved right in, put their stash on the crushed packing carton with the GE trademark. Pulled Tiger's tattered blanket over his skinny body. Son of a bitch. Tiger stood over him, thinking about it. An old man whose name nobody knew cackled softly, anticipating entertainment. The tip of Tiger's shoe touched the intruder's bony rib cage, and he looked up with eyes blanked out by alcohol. Tiger growled low in his throat, but the intruder still didn't get the message. Tiger reached down and stripped the blanket away, and the man began to get the idea. But he still didn't move, so Tiger showed him something he carried in the pocket of his denim jacket, and the man scrambled to his feet and limped away, muttering an unintelligible string of curses or

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complaints. The nameless old man looked disappointed.

Night fell softly. The friendly darkness soothed them. Looseteeth stopped her incessant moaning, she was either sleeping or dead. Big Guy, happy in the prospect of the next morning's business transaction, talked quietly to his neighbor about his wrestling days. The man was happy to listen, enjoying the momentary illusion of social life. Only Tiger remained restless, sitting on his crushed packing case, leaning against the concrete with his scraggly beard moving from one kneecap to the other. His eyes were on the street and he was waiting. He was waiting.

The blond lady rounded the corner, and from the interrupted click of her high heels it was obvious that she had been halted by the unexpected sight of the Overhang people. It happened all the time, day and night. Sometimes, it took the citizens a few moments to define the strange shapes bordering the building, to identify some of the debris as human. Some would speed up their pace, some would be determined to be nonchalant. The blond lady wavered between the choices. She had already seen the sign that said Ferdie's, so the heels clicked on the sidewalk again in alternating rhythms.

Tiger roared. That was the word the Overhang people used later, but it was actually a rasping cry of fury. He was on his feet, and his hand was coming out of the denim jacket, and now they all saw what had frightened off the intruder. They saw the jagged blade of the kitchen knife in Tiger's right hand. They saw him lunge at the blond lady as she passed him on the way to the restaurant entrance. They heard his high-pitched scream of anger as he plunged the knife into her back, just below her thin Modigliani neck.

"Bitch! I told you never to come back! Bitch!"

The blood was terrible, it was a fountain, it was a geyser, but it didn't stop Tiger from using the reddened blade over and over again, until the blond woman stumbled and fell, making gulping sounds, sobbing in terror, and then choking and coughing and becoming as silent as the spectators. Tiger looked at them now, and they shrunk within their wrappings, even Big Guy, and nobody moved when Tiger slipped the knife back into his denim jacket and walked away. He didn't run, they told the police, he walked. His head was high, he didn't seem frightened or even guilty; he had the insouciance of the insane. That was the phrase the police psychiatrist used when he made his report. It didn't ease the pain of Brucie's death. The senselessness of the crime didn't make it any easier for the police when they arrived at Brucie's brownstone house two hours later

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and made their grim announcement to the handsome, clean-shaven young man who answered the door.

. . . As you know, that was the last anybody ever saw of Tiger, even though his description was printed and broadcast in every newspaper and TV news show in the country. It wasn't the first time a homeless man had killed a citizen, and even while they poured on the compassion it was a chance for the media to exploit the hidden fear and loathing so many people have for the homeless, because Tiger was one of them, and didn't Tiger prove the point that this street garbage had become a menace and not just a social problem?

Well, it's not going to make the problem go away, Jerry, but at least we know now that this "homeless man" was only a desperate civilian with a rotten murderer's soul who thought he could commit the old Perfect Crime, that he could pin the killing of his wife on someone who didn't really exist, someone who would vanish without a trace after her death. He thought Brucie's father would grieve so much that some of his compassion would spill over to the bereaved husband, that he would take care of his financial needs just as his daughter had throughout their marriage. Well, Danny Leland (that was his real name) was in for a surprise. His wife's old man had always detested him, and his daughter's death turned it into hatred, and instead of providing for his future he decimated his present. He took away everything he could from the widowed husband and left him without a penny, without a hope, without a future.

Does that sound familiar? Isn't that what's happened to the people we work with all the time? No money, no hope, no future? Well, it happened to Danny Leland. A couple of months ago he took to the streets. He settled into the Greenwich Village area, got into a wino crowd. Kept to himself as much as possible, but there was an ex-wrestler named Big Guy who saw "Tiger" again and shook all over at the memory of that woman's death in front of the Overhang. Big Guy talked to a cop, and Danny Leland is in custody right now, charged with the murder of his wife. As you said, it can happen to anyone.

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Penelope Wallace lives with her husband in Oxford, England. She is currently at work on her autobiography, but took time out to produce this very short piece for EQMM. . . .

POLICE, PLEASE

by PENELOPE WALLACE

—MONDAY—

"Emergency, which service please?"

"Police, please."

"I'm putting you through."

"Police. Emergency."

"I want to report a murder—it's Mrs. Wilkins."

"Yes, Mrs. Wilkins. Where is this murder?"

"Opposite my house at number eleven."

"What makes you think there's been a murder?"

"Terrible screams and the man had a knife. I could see through the curtains."

"I see. Someone will be along, Mrs. Wilkins. Goodbye."

"A murder!"

"I very much doubt it, Colin. Mrs. Wilkins rings about once a week. Robbery, rape, murder, you name it."

"Nothing to it?"

"Nothing. Last week it was someone almost driving over Jason."

"Vehicular manslaughter?"

"Catslaughter. Jason's her old tabby. Hale and hearty when we called. I'll ask Baines to take a look."

"You know, Jason, I don't think they believe me. Well, maybe I have been wrong once or twice—my eyes aren't as good as they used to be. Oh, you are a beautiful boy and you liked your fish, didn't you?"

"Oh yes, Constable, come in."

"Mrs. Wilkins? P.C. Baines."

"Would you like a cup of tea?"

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"Can't stop I'm afraid, madam. I've investigated number eleven. Apparently they're decorating the bedroom; the knife you saw through the curtains was a paint scraper and the screams came from their two kids who wanted to help."

"Oh dear, I am sorry—the shadow looked like a knife and the screams . . ."

"We can all make mistakes, Mrs. Wilkins. Good night."

"Good night, Officer. Oh Jason, it seems we've made another mistake. There's a beautiful boy. Your Uncle Derrick'll be here tomorrow. But he doesn't like cats so you'll have to stay out of his way."

—TUESDAY—

"There's the bell, Jason. That'll be Derrick. Perhaps I'd better put you in the kitchen. There you are—there's a nice bowl of milk for you. There goes the bell again . . . coming . . . coming. Hullo, Derrick."

"You took your time."

"Take off your coat and come into the sitting room and I'll make us a nice cup of tea."

"Bloody cold in here."

"Well, it starts to get chilly in September. I'll light the fire. Pull up the chair. Now I'll get tea."

"Please yourself."

"I've got everything ready. I'll just put the kettle on. Oh Jason, he's not in a happy mood—but then he never is. Always was a bully and he hasn't changed. . . .

"Here we are, Derrick."

"Still got that stinking old cat, I see."

"He doesn't smell and he's not old and his name's Jason. I remembered you didn't like cats and I put him in the kitchen but I'm afraid he came in with me when I brought the tea. It's milk and two sugars still, is it?"

"Yes. I don't change."

"No Derrick, you don't and that's a pity."

"What the hell do you mean?"

"I don't like your language. Currant bread? Or would you prefer a biscuit?"

"Stuff your currant bread. What did you mean?"

"I mean you're a bully. You've always bullied me and you bullied

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Mother so that she left you all her money. And what good has it done you? Drink and gambling . . ."

"Don't booze; don't gamble; don't swear. You sound like a bloody vicar—that reminds me; nearly married one, didn't you?"

"Until you bullied him away. But I was lucky; I met John Wilkins."

"Yeah. Old John Wilkins—handy him popping his clogs and leaving you okay. Didn't he?"

"I miss him—it's lonely."

"Huh! And I suppose you'll leave everything to a cats' home."

"Yes I am, as a matter of fact; and no amount of bullying will make me change my mind. Now please, Derrick, sit down and finish your tea."

"Bloody cats' home. Have you made a will?"

"I . . ."

"You haven't—well that's a joke; say an intruder broke in and battered you to death with a poker. I'm your next of kin, I'd inherit. This seems like a good heavy poker."

"Derrick, put it down."

"Not likely. Bloody rug mats you've got—nearly tripped on one then."

"They were Mother's. Please, Derrick . . ."

"Don't push me, Mary—Christ! . . ."

"He's hit his head on the kerb Jason; he's very quiet—I think . . . I think I'll dial 999."

"Emergency, which service please?"

"Police—this is Mrs. Wilkins, Oxford 432988."

"Police."

"I want to report a murder. My name is Mary Wilkins and . . ."

"Ah yes, Mrs. Wilkins, I'll get someone round there."

"Not her again."

"Her again—murder two days running."

"You know, Jason, they don't believe me again. Of course, I would have said it was self-defence because he was going to hit me with that poker. They'll say he tripped on the rug and hit his head on the fender. Of course, I did push him but I've told them it was murder once; I shan't tell them again.

"I wonder if it will be P.C. Baines; I hope he'll stay for a cup of tea." ●

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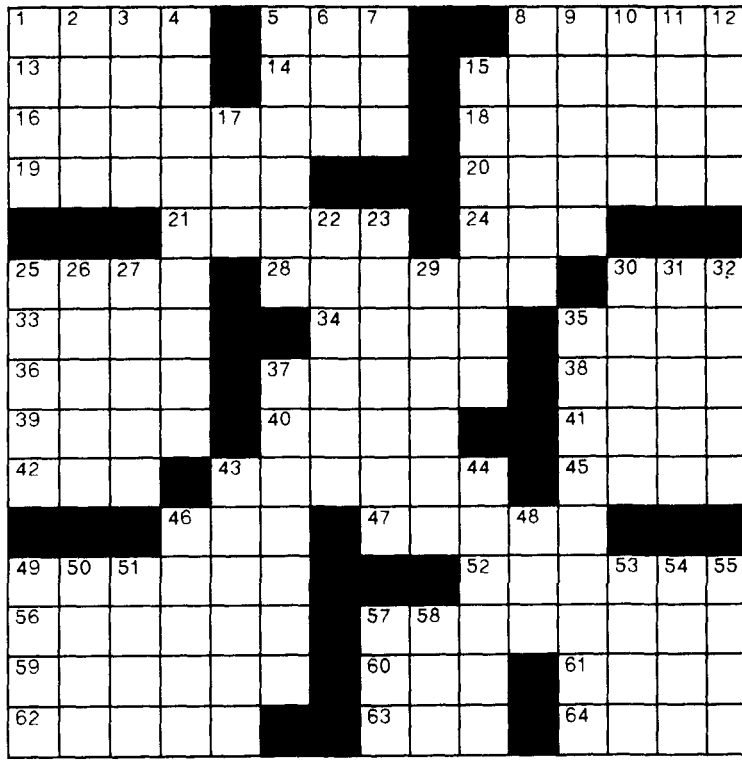
THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

by Leigh Woznick



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PROFESSIONAL AMATEURS

ACROSS

1 Noose fiber
5 Commodity for Peter Marklin
8 Western hill
13 Love, in La Mancha
14 Lengthen
15 Leaping mouse
16 Maggie Rome or Ed Fitzgerald
18 Morgue donations?
19 Favor
20 Koestler, Small and Dowling
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28 Blunt
30 Editor's note
33 Troubles
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40 Arm bone
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42 Sebaceous cyst
43 At the location
45 Torture device
46 Piscine appendage
47 Tooth (comb. form)
49 Emotional condition
52 Poisoner's concern
56 Idolizer
57 Sigismondo
59 Discover
60 Comparative suffix
61 Carbon compound
62 Curves
63 Sweet drink
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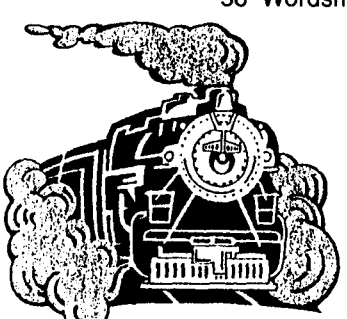
DOWN

1 Stringed instrument
2 Hon. title for 4 down?
3 Brood
4 Kate Fansler or Gervase Fen
5 Cell group
6 Turkish weight unit
7 Occupational suffix
8 Deighton's game site
9 Goaded
10 Ski lift feature
11 Chinese secret society
12 Facile
15 Ken Eagle and Kit Fielding
17 Oedipus's fated title
22 Anglo-Saxon freemen
23 Horsefly
25 Mrs. Pargeter, Mrs. Gamadge, or Mrs. Mallory
26 Martini element
27 Before days or times
29 Contend
30 Pacific islands
31 Related to pelvic bone
32 Hugh Corbett
35 Antony Maitland
37 Keith Calder's study
43 Houston gridders
44 Suffer
46 Mockery
48 Craggy hill
49 Fashioned
50 Dedicatory poems
51 Mr. MacDonald
53 Japanese native
54 School subj.
55 Mr. Gardner
57 Mrs. Pollifax's sometime employer
58 Wordsmith's source (abbr.)



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a ***NEW*** short story by

ROBERT TWOHY

San Franciscan Robert Twohy began his fiction-writing career in EQMM*'s Department of First Stories in 1957. His stories are among the most unique to be featured in our pages. Rarely do we find an author who will attempt so difficult a point of view as that of the inebriated juror in the following tale. . . .*

SEEMS I'VE BEEN THIS WAY BEFORE

by ROBERT TWOHY

YOWP tripped! Lucky didn't pile into old dude this end front row. Got balance justintime, I found it justintime. . . . Which my seat? Yeah yeah same's always second row twix Tubbins and meager wan guy. Don't know his name or hers but Tubbins suit her fine. Move toward her calm-collected like slewfoot, stumble on entry jury-box no big deal, no reason she or any suspect hangover. I'm showered and in fresh shorts socks shirt, slacks and good jacket just back from cleaner—shaving didn't slice meat so no visible scars or whiff of booze I'm sure, can hope. Look better than feel which a lot better when some coffee working in me but not till first recess and we not even yet begun. . . .

Now properly seated Tubbins's left. Good. Good also that His Awesomeness not yet in pulpit when stumbled or he'd've stabbed me with ice-blue fine-toothed eye that cuts through rot slime sham corruption to the naked truth—"Misstep due to drink is contempt. Bailiff, remove that sot!"

Why'd I drink last night? Bigger question—why after thirty-plus years' boozing did I stop for eight months till last night? Easy answer

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both questions—got fed up with condition as was and ready for change. So last night stepped aside and signaled boozehound always on the lurk inside me to call the next tune—

Okay done's done and this is now. . . . Everyone's standing so me too. Himself has arrived. Just kind of there when he is. Maybe lives in desk, roomy enough. Could be on spring and top slide open and up he pop robed and at full glare which he just turned on me why? And why Tubbins jerking my jacket? . . . Okay got it, everyone's down so me too.

. . . Liegelord talking but lips not moving so not he so who? —Gaunt young deputy D.A. picking up where left off yesterday where? Who care? Not me . . . Voice just sound without meaning . . . Guy coming forward to be oathed. Plump and waxy-faced in neat dark suit and nifty little blue bowtie looks like toy figure not real. Nobody real we're all cartoons, Muppet puppets, Lordship and defendant Tom Clade and lawyers both sides and bailiff and deputies and all us jurors. Maybe real before trial which beginnings deep in past. Aug 6 started jury selection which since picked we The Chosen have been getting prosecution's pitch. Today Aug 21 so sixteenth day, sweet sixteen, "16 Tons," best of Ernie Ford's great old songs—YEW OWW YER SOUL TO THE COMP'NY STAW . . .

That's me, this is compny staw and I oww ma soul . . . if not I'd be home flat on couch another six-eight hours as best cure for what ail, ale, the gang's all here, Rainier Ale, two quarts then passed out . . . but seven o'clock sharp alarm jumped around screaming, "Pay the piper you crummy lush!" So here I sit till recess and won't swoon over onto Tubbins or wan guy my left. Will not, will that I not. If matter of will I won't. Triumph of the will. First you say you will, then you won't. . . . Stop playing word games and old songs, get with now—sit straight and alert like fog of words from D.A. and plump toy witness rich with import. Fix on fact that every lead-lined minute clumping by closes in on recess and coffee and eventual end of courtday when I'll board bus for home and lock door and throw phone on floor and fall on couch, peel jacket and shoes and place partials on chair and sleep just sleep . . . sweet and blessed be sleep . . . sleep my little one . . . sleepytime gal you . . .

YOWP! Stretch wide the eyes and squirm up straight . . . wooff! Was mouth wide open? Sure it was 'cause what fully woke me was CLACK! like hammer of doom . . . Why didn't I spend a buck for competent dentist who'd've made me partials that fit right and not

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slew offline when snap mouth shut sudden, CLACK! Good partials may sometimes click but never clack . . .

Never leave in when sleep but this sleep unplanned. What if they'd slid down and jammed in my throat? Headline—JUICED JUROR STRANGLES ON CHEAP CHOPPERS!

Oh oh. His Robishness looking my way. Probly everyone staring—don't look around, stay still and fix on his left shoulder so not get full jolt of Eye that Sees All . . .

Probly my head was sagged back on chairtop with jaws stretched like anaconda greeting fine young dinnerdate—clack came when partly awake. What woke me was sound of some kind just before clack, maybe I snored?

—Now what? Lawyers up and gathered at feet of Wisest of the Wise who's bent forward muttering . . . I'm the subject I know it. He's going to bounce me, can't stand a clacker.

Lawyers have stepped back. Now he's addressing us—"Defendant is suffering another migraine attack and we'll adjourn. I have a meeting this afternoon, so until nine A.M. tomorrow, court is in recess."

—So that's it. We're on the move as always before he's quite finished dismissal. Tubbins is off and gone. I see some frowns—some jurors have driven twenty-plus miles, big waste of gas and remainder of this sudden free day mostly shot. Cost to me $1.70 roundtrip busfare apartment to courthouse—so everybody's out time and gas or busfare except Clade.

But maybe he's biggest loser.

—Why that thought? Don't know, just pushed into my head, means something or nothing—push it out and fix on elevator down to basement café for three-four cups hot and black . . .

What I needed all right which no time to fix when staggering around the dump getting ready. One cup down, can use at least two more. Up and get 'em . . .

Feel much better, not a Muppet anymore—real person with myriad flaws but not complete shlunk, can look clear at stupid and hapless things I do like last night . . . Two doubleshots at John's Place with beer chaser, then hurried home with two quarts Rainier to round off the revels . . . and this is murder trial with special circumstances, meaning Clade could get death.

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So I blew it last night 'cause ready for change. —Okay last night's history. Get with now —Why Clade maybe biggest loser? Spread that thought out, look at it . . .

The Great Auk laid recess on his migraine—why? Didn't want to humiliate me? Considers me generally okay juror who screwed up last night but won't repeat?

. . . First migraine attack was eighth-ninth day, midafternoon. Pathologist on stand was describing condition of two victims—Clade suddenly jerks forward grabbing face and lets out high-pitched yelp. Defense jumped up and conferred with the Auk, D.A. joining—Auk then told us Clade subject to migraines, longtime condition not related to trial, and dismissed us after long enough day which nobody sorry to have cut a little short.

But today expression on some jurors indicates not happy to be let out so quick. When unhappy can come urge to look for someone to blame—who? Not me, Auk laid recess on Clade—so some jurors maybe a little peeved at Clade?

. . . Why? Auk made clear first time that attacks not his fault. But maybe some wondering if this time he faked it?

—Why that thought? Don't know. Lay it out . . . First time he grabbed face and yelped, this time maybe no grab or yelp though can't prove by me, being passed out till jerked awake by probly my own snore which a yelp from Clade could've got lost in—or I didn't snore, somebody belched. Don't know, sound that woke me can't put label on.

—Why'm I pounding this or why's it pounding me? Why I feel guilty? 'Cause got drunk last night of course—but if some jurors are sore at Clade for recess, I didn't ask Auk to lay it on him and defense lawyer didn't argue or fret so why should I?

. . . Thoughts spinning around and getting no focus. Done's done and simple truth is that if some jurors resentful at Clade, not my fault. Auk put recess on him for own reasons—I'm just pawn on the board and he called the move so what's my problem?

. . . Coffee long finished. No more, three enough . . .

Small resentment can feed on self and get big. Our verdict sposed to be on evidence brought forth and not personal feelings. But evidence may not point clear direction—so at finish may be no place to go but gut feelings which can include or be shaped by resentment that started because unwanted recess was laid on Clade not me, 'cause Auk wanted spare me embarrassment?

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—All which sound like psychobabble and is. But under psychobabble if you pound it you sometimes find truth.

I got nothing against Clade or for him. As of now he's mild-seeming young guy in grey suit far end counsel table who may have murdered his dope-dealer buddy and latter's woman, or not. Much still to be laid out about him and the murder night. When it's all said and we're alone and working it out, I want that we get to a fair verdict on evidence with minimum gut input.

So round and round I go, down and down I go to bottom line, which is—that I got the right and duty to myself, to take responsibility for own foulups—so don't coddle me, I don't want it, won't have it.

If what happened so far isn't my fault, a gut feeling verdict based on faulty data, which is possible, *will* be my fault if I sit passive and not do something.

Do what?

Tell him.

Tell him what?

—Get up and collect empty cartons for trash can. Move to elevators. Don't know where I'll find him but somewhere in courthouse if not gone home.

—Tell him that if Constitution or legal ethics or whatever prevent him telling jury first thing tomorrow that real reason for recess was that I was unfit for duty . . . "then, Your Honor, I'll tell them myself!"

Will I really say that to him? Right now, this moment, yes I will. It's scary but yes I will.

I've enough guilt sacks full of promises unkept and good deeds not done to lug around—don't need this one.

—Push button. He may still be in courtroom rapping with lawyers. If not I'll find out where his office . . .

"Are you pleased with the day off?" Who's asking?—Tubbins, who's come up on my flank.

I've mumbled something back. She's saying it's a fine day out and she'll probly go down to Hillsdale Mall, have lunch at a little place there where they make wonderful shrimp salad, do I like shrimp salad? Loathsome stuff, hate it—tell her I like it a lot.

We're aboard, no one else. Push eight, ask her floor, push five. What's on five? Nothing to me, her stop not mine.

Headshake, sigh—"Really startling. I mean that sharp scream."

Sharp scream. I couldn't recall noise that woke me and now it's recalled. Head flopped back, jaws spread, I'd let out a sharp scream.

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"So sudden. And nothing much was being said by the witness, like it was the first time." We're drifting up. "I want to say something . . ." Shoots eyes around like making sure a deputy or lawyer not crouched in a corner listening—"First time I wasn't completely sure. Almost, but not completely."

"First time."

"But this morning was real. I knew right away it wasn't pretend, everyone did—don't you agree?" Nod yes. "I was an R.N. I know a cry of genuine pain."

We're stopped on five. She's stepped forward but hesitates. Doors sliding shut. She's reached a firm hand to block left door so right stops too and we stay put. She's looking at me with big anxious eyes. "Don't misunderstand—I don't know yet if he's guilty or innocent. But I know a cry of real pain."

"Pain plays the field."

"He was suffering."

"Which was why the recess. Not me."

Her look is honest puzzlement or she's a good actress. "I'm sorry—what'd you say?"

"Nothing. Passing thought." Smile. "Have a nice shrimp salad." She's stepped clear, doors've slid shut.

On up to eight. Doors open. I stay put. Ordinary small-scale citizen in faded blue slacks, bunchy grey sweater gets on.

I've pushed one, glance to see if he wants different, he nods that one's for him.

Downward bound in a swoop. Nobody wants on. He's looking at me. He's short and wide with clear blue eyes aimed up at me, bright and appraising not iced blades like when on high and he in black robe of power.

I look back. We hold steady. He has slight smile, maybe me too.

We've landed. Doors slide apart. He turns to go, says toward me, "Tomorrow's a new day."

"Yes."

He goes his way, I go mine. Till tomorrow, nine A.M.

Wonder if he heard me clack. Maybe not nearly so loud outside as for me inside. Maybe only I heard it, their ears still ringing from Clade's sharp scream which my snore if any got lost in.

Maybe head wasn't back on chair with jaws spread. Maybe I sat straight with mouth open just a little and eyes closed only a second or three, like pondering if hidden depths to plump man's apparently lukewarm testimony.

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. . . I'm crossing marble lobby feeling sprightlier than when crossed it just before nine, though coffee I've took in is sending message that now's the time and the place is down left corridor second door right. . . .

Now I'm walking loose and easy with no duties pressing . . . Up Marshall Street toward bus stop for 7B to home . . . If Tubbins hadn't given me true picture of morning's action I'd have told Auk what I went up to tell him.

True? Yes. I know when lying to myself and when not. Sometimes I may say I'm not when I am, but then from somewhere inside comes a mocking snort and I know I am. . . . I heard no snort. Say it again and listen—*I'd have gone through with it and not pussed out.* . . . No snort.

. . . I feel good. Eight months I was sober. Now it's ten hours without a drink . . . sixteenth day of the trial and Day One again of sobriety. Previous Day One stretched to eight months—how long this time?

"Tomorrow's a new day," said the Auk. Yes. But now is today. Day at a time is the word.

Home with door locked phone on floor clothes off. I'm stretched out on couch with teeth on near chair and now for sleep—deep dulcet dear desirable demure dreamy creamy delightful . . . delicious . . . delovely . . . delec . . .

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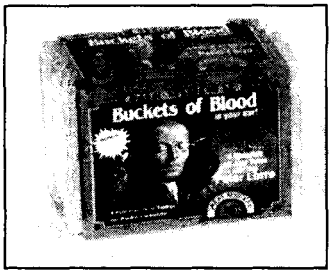

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a *NEW* Leopold story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Is Captain Leopold headed for a career as a private eye? In this latest adventure the retired police detective is saved from languishing in his retirement from the force by a private investigative assignment for his wife, criminal lawyer Molly Calendar. Whether this is the start of something new for Leopold, Mr. Hoch tells us we'll just have to wait and see. . . .

LEOPOLD'S GUNS

by EDWARD D. HOCH

Molly Calendar had quit the practice of criminal law shortly after her marriage to Captain Leopold. Civil law was neither as interesting nor as rewarding for her, but at least it had kept her out of conflicts with her husband. There was no worry about defending someone that he had arrested only days earlier. Now that he was retired, the situation was different.

"I'm going back into criminal law," she'd told him one evening. "There's no reason why I shouldn't."

He smiled at her. "It was always your first love, Molly. I've come close to suggesting it myself once or twice."

"Why haven't you?"

He shrugged. "The hours can be long and painful. You know that yourself. I was hoping we'd have more time for travel."

"I take vacations just like everyone else," she reminded him. "We can be free the entire month of August, when most of the judges are away."

"It's a fine idea," he told her. He'd always known her career was important to her, and he couldn't expect her to give it up and retire with him. "Maybe you'd even have some work for a retired cop."

He'd been kidding when he said it.

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* * *

It seemed like a routine case at the beginning. Molly Calendar was representing a woman named Clara Gomez, accused of selling three Cobray M-11 handguns to an undercover cop posing as a drug dealer. The guns had been converted from semiautomatic to fully automatic firing, making them illegal submachine guns in the eyes of the law. Molly explained that much to Leopold over dinner one cool November evening.

"What sort of defense are you planning?" he asked. He was finishing the last of her chicken specialty that she cooked for him on those rare occasions when time permitted.

"The Cobray is a legal weapon in its semiautomatic state. My client insists she didn't know they had been altered illegally."

Leopold grunted and sipped his dry white wine. "How much was she selling them for?"

Molly looked at her plate. "Twelve hundred each."

"At that price she knew they were altered. The M-11 sells in stores for around four hundred."

"The street price is more. I've asked around. Twelve hundred isn't unreasonable."

"She still broke the law by trying to sell them in the first place," he argued.

Molly closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them to meet his gaze. "You really don't want me doing criminal law again, do you? The girl's got a little money. She's paying me."

"It's not that," Leopold insisted. "Everyone's entitled to a fair trial in this country. You just shouldn't forget that the woman's a criminal."

"Clara Gomez is a nineteen-year-old girl."

"She's an adult in the eyes of the law. The weapons she tried to sell could have killed a cop. They could have killed Fletcher or Connie."

She dropped her eyes and picked at her food. Finally she said quietly, "I was going to ask you to help me on this."

"Help you? How?"

"Remember a few weeks ago when I said I wanted to get back into criminal law? You said maybe I'd even have some work for a retired cop."

He did remember saying that. "It was just a joke, something to say."

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"Clara Gomez claims the guns must have been altered in Ohio, before she and her boyfriend got them. I want to send an investigator to Ohio, to try verifying her story. It could mean a reduced charge against her, a chance for a plea bargain. I thought maybe you'd like to do it."

"Go to Ohio?"

"If that's really where the guns came from. I'm meeting with her in the morning. If you're willing to act as my investigator I'd like you to sit in on the session."

Leopold thought about it. The idea of working for Molly was strange to him, no matter what he might have said. He was sixty-five years old, retired from his life's career. Would they laugh at him down at headquarters when the word got out he was working for his wife? "I don't know—" he started to say.

As if reading his mind, Molly told him, "It could be just this once, out of town. No one would even know about it."

"I might have to testify at the trial if I uncover something."

"Chances are there won't even be a trial if you uncover something."

"I'll go with you to see her," he decided suddenly. "If it looks at all promising I'll do it."

"Thanks," she said.

As luck would have it, Fletcher was just coming out of the county jail as they arrived. They still saw Fletcher and his wife socially every few weeks, and the men had been good friends throughout their police career together. Fletcher was the man Leopold had most wanted to replace him, and he'd had no reason to regret his choice. Still, he felt a bit uneasy as he explained his presence there.

"Molly wants me to do some legwork on one of her cases," he said after they'd exchanged the usual pleasantries.

"Which one is that?" Captain Fletcher asked.

Molly took over the conversation. "Clara Gomez. She's accused of selling guns to an undercover officer."

Fletcher nodded. "They may bring federal charges against her. The ATF boys are looking into it." ATF was the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, a federal department that had become increasingly involved in investigations of illegal weapons and explosives.

"I'm going to ask for bail at her arraignment," Molly said.

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Fletcher shook his head. "Not much chance of that. She has no roots in the community. She's been living with her boyfriend, who's away most of the time. They could skip town the moment she's released, and probably would."

"We'll see," Molly answered grimly.

"Good luck." Fletcher left them and hurried down the steps to the street.

In the interview room reserved for lawyers and clients, Leopold and Molly waited while the prisoner was brought to them. Clara Gomez was a small young woman with long black hair and the sort of sullen expression one often found on teenagers thrust into unwanted adult company. She sat down opposite them and asked Molly, "Do you have a cigarette?"

"I'm sorry. I don't smoke. I'll try to bring you some next time. This is Mr. Leopold. He's going to be doing some investigating for me."

Leopold smiled and held out his hand. "Pleased to meet you, Miss Gomez." He'd been startled when Molly introduced him as "Mister." It was something he hadn't yet gotten used to.

Molly unzipped her briefcase and took out a yellow legal pad. "Suppose you tell me everything you know about those guns, Clara."

"I don't know nothing."

Molly tried giving her a friendly smile. "You could be in big trouble. I don't want to frighten you, but there's talk of bringing federal charges against you. Possession of three submachine guns, transporting them across state lines, selling them illegally and without a license—"

"I didn't transport them."

"What about your boyfriend? Did he bring them into the city?"

"He brought them from Ohio. I didn't know there was any law against it."

"Where is your boyfriend now, Clara? I think you told me his name was Kurt Petisi."

"Kurt, yeah. I don't know where he is. He comes and goes."

"Tell me about the guns."

"Well, Kurt bought them. He told me I could make some money by selling them while he was away. He never said it was illegal. I never had them out of their boxes. I don't know any of this automatic or semiautomatic. Guns are guns. I met a fellow at Jumbo City who said he was looking for guns."

"Did he say why he wanted them?"

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She shrugged. "It's a rough neighborhood where I live. Drug dealers, things like that. Honest people need guns for protection."

"He needed three guns for protection?" Molly asked.

"Yeah, well, he was getting one for a friend, for hunting."

"The Cobray M-11 has a long magazine holding thirty cartridges. It can fire at the rate of one thousand rounds per minute in its fully automatic mode. For a novice it's a very difficult weapon to handle. The recoil throws the gun up and back, sprays bullets all over."

Clara Gomez screwed up her face. "Yeah, see, I don't know any of this. Kurt was gonna be away and he said, Hey, I'll order some guns from Ohio. If you run short of cash you can sell 'em."

"Did he suggest the price you should ask?"

"Yeah. He said to start at twelve hundred each and come down a little if I had to."

"You don't see anything wrong with this?"

The young woman shrugged. "It was better than selling my body."

"All right," Molly said with a sigh. "Let's go over this again. Kurt Petisi purchased the guns from a dealer in Ohio. Then he brought them here and went away. Where'd he go?"

"He has business in Boston. He said he'd be back in a month or two."

"Did you show the guns to anyone, or have them altered in any way?"

She shook her head. "That cop was the first one to see them. He paid me the money and another cop arrested me. Just my luck, huh?"

"Do you know the name of the dealer in Ohio?"

"Connex, I think. Something like that. In Ashtabula."

"We'll check on it," Molly promised.

"Will they let me out on bail?"

"Don't count on it. I'll do the best I can."

It was easiest for Leopold to fly into Cleveland, rent a car at the airport, and double back to Ashtabula, along Lake Erie. There was a gun dealer named Connex listed in the phone book, but by the time he'd driven the hour or so from the Cleveland airport it was evening and the shop was closed. He took a room at a nearby motel and phoned Molly at home to tell her where he was.

"How'd the arraignment go?" he asked.

"Fletcher was right. The judge denied bail. We'll have another chance later but it doesn't look too promising. I've got to admit they're right. She probably would skip town."

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"I don't need another of those," he said, remembering a case he'd helped Fletcher solve just after his retirement. "I'll see Connex first thing in the morning and get back to you."

"Be careful," she cautioned. "I miss you."

It was a new experience for Leopold, operating like a private investigator in a strange city. After a light breakfast the following morning he drove to Connex Guns and Hunting Supplies, down near the lake. There was only one person inside when he entered, a tall and slender man with black hair and a slim moustache. He looked around thirty-five.

"I'm looking for Mr. Connex," Leopold said.

"I'm Harold Connex. What can I do for you?"

"I work for an attorney in Connecticut. A young woman there has been arrested on a charge of selling illegal weapons. She claims her boyfriend purchased them here and transported them back home. I'm trying to trace the guns as part of her defense." He passed Connex one of Molly's business cards. "My name is Leopold. This is the attorney who employs me."

Harold Connex frowned as he studied the card. "What's the woman's name?"

"Clara Gomez. She says the guns were purchased recently by Kurt Petisi."

"Were they hunting rifles? I deal mostly in hunting rifles around here."

"These were Cobray M-11 pistols."

Connex seemed to tense up. "I only sell the Cobray as a rifle, for hunting purposes. If the buyer wants to cut down the barrel and remove the shoulder stock, that's out of my hands."

"Do you ever do conversions—semiautomatic to fully automatic?"

"That's against the law."

"I know. I asked if you ever did them."

"No," he answered flatly. "Are you a federal agent?"

"I'm exactly what I said I was. My employer is trying to clear this young woman or at least get the charges against her lowered. All I want from you is information. If you cooperate I'll be on my way back home this afternoon."

Connex reached under the counter for a ledger. "What's the name? Petisi?"

"That's right. The sale was probably within the past month."

He made a show of flipping the ledger pages and finally came up with it. "Back in October. Kurt Petisi. Paid by credit card."

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"Is he an Ohio resident?"

"Doesn't have to be, to buy rifles. Look, mister, I keep more records than the law requires. You won't catch me up on anything."

"I'm not trying to catch you up," Leopold assured him. "How many M-11s did he buy?"

"Six of them, along with a thousand rounds of 9mm ammunition and some extra clips for the ammo." He showed Leopold the ledger.

"Six."

"I remember him now. Said he was going on a hunting trip with some friends and wanted to give them each a rifle as a gift."

"Nice gift. What do you get for them here?"

"Three ninety-five each. I knocked off five percent because he was buying six."

"Three of them ended up back in Connecticut, sold to an undercover police officer. He probably figured on selling them all and getting the cash before his credit card bill came due."

"I didn't break any laws," Connex insisted.

"I'm sure you didn't." Leopold took a folded twenty-dollar bill from his pocket and slid it across the counter. "I wonder, if I paid for a few minutes more of your time, whether you could tell me about converting these weapons to fully automatic. Is it difficult to do?"

The gun dealer frowned again. "Why do you want to know that?"

"The police back home say this teenaged girl might have done the converting. Could she have the knowledge and ability for that?"

Harold Connex shrugged. "It used to be easy with the MAC-10. Anyone could convert it to automatic fire with a paper clip. The ATF boys got after the company that made 'em and negotiated for a safer weapon. That's how the Cobray was born. A gunsmith would need instructions and parts to convert a Cobray, but it could be done. Not by any nineteen-year-old girl, though. Not unless she'd had lots of training."

"Could you do it?"

"I don't break the law, mister." He picked the twenty from the counter and walked away. "Good talkin' to you."

Thinking about his own journey to the town, Leopold decided that Kurt Petisi would have driven his car to pick up the guns. He wouldn't have risked boarding a plane with them, even in his checked luggage, and the drive from Connecticut would only take about seven hours. He'd have spent the night somewhere, either with a friend or at a motel. Leopold checked his own place and the

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other motels in the area, thankful that most of them had computerized guest reservations, but he came up with no one named Petisi.

It proved nothing, of course. He might have spent the night en route, or used an assumed name. There were a couple of local bars and he checked those out too, feeling a bit like he had in the old days when he was out doing his own legwork on murder cases. But no one had ever heard of Kurt Petisi. Apparently he'd come and gone from the city without seeing anyone but the gunsmith, Harold Connex. If the guns had been converted from semi to fully automatic weapons, the work could have been done by Connex or Petisi or even Clara Gomez. The day was past when she could be eliminated simply because the job required so-called masculine skills like sawing through a gun barrel or following complex printed instructions.

Leopold flew back home that evening. He'd left his car at La Guardia and it took him another hour to drive up to Connecticut. There was a car parked in front of their house and in the darkness he didn't immediately recognize it as Fletcher's vehicle. He and Molly were having coffee in the living room when Leopold entered.

"How was the trip?" Fletcher asked.

"Fair." Leopold slipped off his topcoat. "Is this social or business?" He could tell the answer in advance from Fletcher's serious expression.

"I'm afraid the Clara Gomez case has escalated. We'll be charging her with murder tomorrow."

"Murder? The girl is sitting in a jail cell!"

Captain Fletcher sighed and took another sip of coffee. "We had two undercover officers working on the traffic in illegal weapons. Vince Taggert is the man who arrested the Gomez woman. Marty Blake was working with him. We hadn't heard from Marty for a few days, but that's not unusual with an undercover cop. Some of these unmarried guys throw themselves into undercover assignments, staying with a suspect for days until they get a chance to report in."

"You're telling me something happened to Marty Blake?" Leopold had known the young man slightly and viewed him as someone with great potential.

"They found his body in a culvert over on Windsor, behind the stadium. He'd been shot several times with a 9mm weapon. A search turned up a Cobray in a dumpster about a block away."

"The bullets match?"

Fletcher nodded. "The serial number, too."

"On the weapon?"

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"The three Cobrays Clara Gomez was trying to sell were numbered 60501, 60502, and 60503. This one was 60504."

"That proves nothing," Molly insisted from the couch.

"What is it you're getting at?" Leopold asked.

"We think the Gomez woman had four weapons, not three. When Marty Blake tried to arrest her she killed him and ditched the gun. She had to get rid of the other three fast so she tried to sell them to Taggert and got nailed."

"It's more likely her boyfriend Kurt kept the fourth Cobray for himself," Molly argued. "Why haven't you found him?"

"We're looking. We have the Boston police checking up there. That's where he's supposed to have gone." He got to his feet. "I'm sorry about this, Molly, but I figured you'd rather hear it from me than find out in the morning."

Molly saw him to the door, trying to be gracious, but when she returned she was visibly angry. "They're persecuting that poor girl! Just because the gun's serial number—"

Leopold passed her the notes he'd made in Ashtabula. "The dealer says he sold Kurt Petisi six Cobrays. The serial numbers run consecutively from 501 through 506. The gun that killed Marty Blake was one of them, sold to Petisi and possibly passed on to Clara Gomez."

"Why would he give her six guns, or even four? They seem to have been worth up to twelve hundred dollars each."

"Why would he give her three?" Leopold countered. "You'd better talk to your client again, Molly. Maybe she bought them from him to resell them. She might have thought it sounded better to claim he gave them to her."

"Damn!" Molly started pacing. "We have to find Kurt Petisi. Can you do it for me?"

"I'll try. I know Vince Taggert, the undercover cop who arrested the Gomez girl. I'll try talking to him in the morning."

Taggert was a young man still in his twenties who wore a short beard that he sometimes streaked with gray on undercover assignments. Leopold met him in the coffee shop across from headquarters, in a back booth where he hoped they wouldn't be noticed. "I have to tell you up front that my wife Molly is handling the Gomez defense," he said. "We're trying to find this fellow Petisi who gave her the guns."

"So is Captain Fletcher. We think he's in Boston. For all we know he's got a string of girls acting as his agents in various cities. Maybe

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instead of prostitutes or drug dealers he's got gun runners. That would be a new one, huh?"

"Tell me about the arrest, as much as you can."

"Hell, why not? Molly will hear it all at the preliminary anyway. See, Marty and I were working as a team on this. We'd been hearing for a few months that there was a girl selling fully automatic Cobrays out of the trunk of her car at twelve hundred a pop. We each followed up different leads on it, and I didn't hear anything from Marty." He looked grim for a moment. "That musta been when he got it. They figure two nights before I made my arrest."

"How did he die?"

"A straight line of bullets across his chest. You could have put a ruler on them. Had to be a machine pistol or a submachine gun. They found the Cobray nearby in a dumpster."

Leopold nodded. Submachine guns used pistol ammunition rather than rifle cartridges. "Was the clip empty when they found the weapon?"

"No, the clip was still about half full. Why do you ask?"

"A fleeing murderer might be reluctant to discard a loaded weapon if he thought he might need it. But if he or she had three others available—"

"Yeah. The serial number shows it came from the same batch as the three she tried to sell me."

"Tell me about that."

He leaned back in the booth and took a bite of his jelly donut. "Somebody mentioned Clara's name and I finally tracked her down. She was with a girlfriend at Sammy's Jumbo City."

It was a fast-food place not far from where Marty Blake's body had later been found. They stayed open all night and Leopold knew it was a popular spot for after-midnight drug dealing. "Do you know the other girl's name?"

"Risky, she's called. Risky French. A couple of prostitution arrests but nothing serious. No drugs or guns."

"Not yet. They usually get to it."

"Yeah. Anyway, after Risky left I moved in, started chatting. Happened to mention I was planning a hunting trip and needed some good rifles. That's a fairly standard opening. Before long she mentioned the three Cobrays but said they weren't in perfect condition. The barrels had been cut down and the stocks removed. I asked if they were fast-action. That's another code word for fully automatic. She indicated they were, and mentioned a figure of twelve

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hundred each. We dickered a bit and she agreed to thirty-two hundred for all three. A thousand each plus tax, she said."

"So you gave her the money?"

"I said I'd be back with it in twenty minutes. Then I called for backup. I never try to make the arrest myself, not when someone is standing there with an illegal weapon pointed at your stomach. I wish Marty'd remembered that."

"Where'd she have the guns?"

"In a shopping bag in the trunk of her car, just like I'd heard. As soon as she had the cash she took me out to show me. They were still in their original boxes from the factory. The ammo and clips were separate. I took them and she walked away with the money in marked bills. My backup grabbed her at the door to Jumbo City."

"Do you think she killed Marty Blake?"

"Either her or the boyfriend. It's a tossup."

That night Leopold unlocked the desk drawer where he kept his three personal guns. There was a Luger war souvenir, a .38 revolver, and a 9mm Italian automatic. All were licensed. Like most detectives, and cops in general, he had personal guns he kept at home. Molly had seen them only once since their marriage and she hated them.

Now she came into the room as he weighed the revolver and the automatic in his hands, choosing which one he'd carry. "Do you need those?" she asked.

"The Beretta, I think. It's a bit easier to hide."

She drew a breath. "How many people have you killed?"

"I can't remember," he lied, remembering every one.

"They're presenting the case to the grand jury next week. I need Petisi."

"I'll do the best I can."

Sammy's Jumbo City was busy the following evening, as it usually was. The first three people Leopold asked denied knowing Risky French and the next one knew her only slightly. No, he hadn't seen her around. It seemed hopeless for Leopold to wait, but he had no other leads. He spread the word that he was looking for her and finally at ten past eleven she turned up, wearing a red Spandex exercise suit with a little skirt over it. She had dirty red hair and cool blue eyes.

"You're Captain Leopold? I hear you're looking for me."

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"Not Captain anymore. I'm retired."

"You look too young to retire," she said, touching his arm as she went into her routine.

"Cut it, Risky. I want to know about Clara Gomez."

Her face turned serious. "What about Clara?"

"She's in a lot of trouble."

"Story of her life."

"I'm working for her defense attorney. We're trying to locate this boyfriend of hers, Kurt Petisi."

She lit a cigarette and eyed him for a moment through the smoke. Then she started talking. "I told her not to get involved with him. Not seriously involved, anyway. He's been showing up every few months, trying to get girls to peddle guns for him. They split the profits fifty-fifty and it was a pretty good deal. Selling guns in this town is about as hard as passing out dollar bills on a street corner. But then she went and fell in love with him! I told her to find someone her own age, not to tumble for the guy just because he had lots of money and looked like a thin Clark Gable. No, she wouldn't listen to me. When Kurt was around she wouldn't listen to anybody. She got careless in who she sold the guns to. Imagine selling to an undercover cop she didn't even know!"

"You heard about the other cop who was killed?"

"Yeah." She took another puff and stubbed out the cigarette.

"Could Clara have killed him?"

"She wouldn't kill anyone. She's just, like, a lost innocent, you know?"

"I know," Leopold said with a sigh. "Who else was she selling to?"

"Mostly people involved in drugs. They weren't all bad themselves, but they needed the heavy firepower for protection."

"Give me a name, Risky. Someone she sold to recently."

She looked a bit frightened. "I don't want to testify in court."

"You shouldn't have to."

"Sam Wantor. He deals a little. I know she sold him a piece last week."

"A Cobray?"

"I think so. I don't know. Hell, don't tell him I said it!"

"I won't. Keep your nose clean, Risky." He left her at the table.

Leopold had known Sam Wantor as a police informer and petty criminal. His right arm was almost useless due to an auto accident in his youth and he blamed it for his difficulty in holding a decent

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job. He preferred to loiter around the fringes of the inner city, picking up what cash he could. He liked to gamble, and Leopold found him quite easily at the second all-night crap game he checked out.

"I heard you were retired, Captain. How you doin'?"

"Pretty well. The dice rolling for you tonight?"

A shrug. "Can't complain."

"Got a few minutes?"

"Sure." They walked away to a far corner of the basement where the crap game was in progress. "What's up? You still buyin' information?"

"Not officially. I'm working on Clara Gomez's defense right now. They tell me you know her."

"Clara? Sure, nice kid."

"You bought a gun from her last week."

His grimy face clouded. "Who told you—?"

"Submachine guns are illegal. You know that, don't you?"

"Who said I got a submachine gun?"

"Clara's in jail for selling them. I just need to know the serial number on your weapon, that's all."

"Look, Captain, you see this arm I got? I couldn't even fire the damn thing! I just need it for protection. It scares people to see it. It's at my place. I never take it out."

"Show me. A cop was killed with one the other night. I want to make sure it wasn't yours."

"I heard they recovered the gun that did it."

"I still want to see yours."

Sam Wantor shrugged. "Come along." He called out to the others that he'd be back soon, then led Leopold to a loft building about two blocks away. "They got this partitioned off into one-room apartments," he said. "Follow me."

He unlocked a door and led Leopold into a dim room lit only by a neon sign glowing through the curtained window. "Where's the gun, Sam?"

"In here." He opened a closet door and when he turned around the Cobray was in his left hand, pointed at Leopold's stomach.

Leopold slapped the barrel aside and jammed his Beretta into Wantor's middle. "No tricks, Sam. I haven't been retired that long."

"Hell, I was just—"

"Let's just say it looked bad. Men have gotten themselves shot for less." He took the weapon and slipped his own gun back in its belt holster. Snapping on the overhead light, he read the serial number

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stamped into the metal just above the trigger housing. 60505. "Is this the one Clara sold you?"

"Yeah. Her and Kurt."

"He was there too?"

"In the car. I'd won a grand at craps the night before and I figured this was a good investment."

"For drug dealers and street gangs. Which are you, Sam?"

"Give me a break, Captain. I showed it to you like you asked."

"The weapon's illegal. It's been altered to make it fully automatic. It's a twin of the one that killed that undercover cop, Marty Blake. The serial number's almost identical."

Wantor took a deep breath. He saw that he could be in big trouble. "Take the gun, Captain. I make you a gift of it! Tell them you found it somewhere, only don't arrest me, okay?"

"I'm not a policeman anymore," Leopold reminded him. "I'll take the gun and turn it in as you suggest, but don't look to me for any help in the future. Stick to your crap games and stay away from drugs."

He left Wantor's loft apartment and walked back to his car. Driving home gave him time to think, and by the time he arrived there he knew what had to be done.

In the morning he visited Fletcher at the Violent Crimes squad room. "What's in the bag?" Fletcher asked as he came in. "I've already had breakfast."

Leopold took out the Cobray M-11. "This would be hard on the teeth anyway." He placed it carefully on the desk with the long clip of bullets next to it.

"Where'd you get it?"

"I found it last night. Its serial number comes right after the murder weapon. I believe there were six guns in all and now five are accounted for. Vince brought in three when he arrested the Gomez girl, the fourth was used on Marty Blake, and this is the fifth. That leaves one missing."

"Where is it, Leopold?"

He sat down in the chair that Fletcher had occupied over the years. "You know, I never realized this was so uncomfortable. You should have told me."

Fletcher grinned. "You want something, don't you? Or Molly does."

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"We both do. We want you to take Clara Gomez back to her apartment tonight."

"You know that bail's been denied."

"She won't be out on bail. You'll have her in custody the entire time. You can even keep her handcuffed if you want. I'm just trying to solve your case for you."

"It is solved. The Gomez woman is in jail."

"She sold guns. She didn't kill Blake."

"Can you prove that?"

"Yes. And I'd rather do it here than in a courtroom."

Fletcher pulled at his lower lip. "Let me think about it."

"Come on, Captain. This is me! How many times have we worked together?"

Fletcher held up his hands in surrender. "You'd better not mess me up."

Two hours later Leopold and Molly sat with her client in the jail interview room. Clara Gomez was frightened and cooperative, but she wanted to know, "When am I getting out of here?"

"Not for some time, I'm afraid," Molly told her. "We're working to see that you don't spend the rest of your life inside for killing an undercover cop."

"I had nothing to do with that!" she insisted loudly.

Molly's fixed expression didn't change. "You sold a fourth gun to a man named Sam Wantor last week. Why didn't you tell me that?"

Clara looked uncomfortable. "Well, it wasn't really me. Kurt was there too. He was showing me the ropes."

"Mr. Leopold here is going to ask you to do something. It's quite simple, and if you want to have any chance at a lighter sentence or even a plea bargain you'd better follow his instructions."

She shifted her gaze to Leopold. "What is it?"

He pushed a pad and pencil across the table to her. "I want you to write what I say. Understand?"

She nodded.

"Dear Kurt—"

The pencil stopped at once. "What is this?"

"Do it!" Molly urged. "It's the only chance you've got."

"Dear Kurt," Leopold resumed his dictation. "I'm out on bail. Meet me at the apartment at ten tonight. If you don't come I'll have to tell them everything. Love, Clara."

She hesitated near the end of the note. "You're trying to trap him, aren't you? This note won't do you any good because you don't know where he is."

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"Please finish it," Molly said. "Is Clara what he calls you?"

"Yeah."

"Then sign it and hand it here."

"Am I really getting out?"

"Briefly," Molly told her. "Believe me, everything we're doing is in your best interest."

Fletcher arrived at the jail shortly after eight that evening. Leopold and Molly were waiting. "Did Petisi get the note?" he asked.

Leopold shrugged. "I hope so. Here's the plan. Molly will walk into the apartment with her in about an hour. You and I will go in the back way in case he arrives early and is watching. Then we just wait and see."

"How will he get in?"

"Clara admitted he has a key. I think he'll use it."

Fletcher looked unhappy. "If something goes wrong on this—"

"Trust me," Leopold said.

Clara Gomez was taken from her cell in handcuffs and escorted down to the waiting car at the back of the building. Molly sat with her in the backseat while Leopold rode up front next to Fletcher. It took them only ten minutes to reach the inner-city apartment where Clara had been living. The thought had occurred to Leopold that Kurt might have gotten there sooner than expected and be waiting for them, so he had Fletcher drop him off first around the corner. He entered through the back door with Clara's key and checked out the apartment first. It was empty.

When Fletcher drove by and saw that Leopold had lowered a shade, he knew it was safe to drop off Molly and Clara Gomez. Leopold watched while they approached the front door. Clara had a raincoat over her shoulders to hide the fact that she was wearing handcuffs, and Molly walked with her arm comfortingly around her.

Leopold was waiting just inside the downstairs door as they entered. "All clear so far," he assured them. "Let's go right up."

Clara moistened her lips. "He's not going to come."

"We'll see."

Fletcher came up the back way a few minutes later. Leopold took him aside, so the women wouldn't hear. "If he shows at all he'll probably have that sixth Cobray with him. We can't let him get off a shot. He's killed one cop already."

"I know that. I don't like having Molly here."

"Neither do I," Leopold admitted. "But she is Clara's lawyer. She had to be in on it."

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They waited, mostly in silence. Ten o'clock came and nothing happened. Molly had turned on a couple of lights to show that someone was home, but still nothing happened.

"He's not coming," Clara said again, more at ease now, though she was still handcuffed.

They waited. At ten-thirty Leopold said, "We'll give him till midnight."

It was just after eleven when Molly clutched his arm. She'd heard the sound from the back door before the others. "This may be him," Leopold whispered. "Molly, get on the floor."

"I want to—"

"Get on the floor!" he whispered sharply. "Keep Clara with you."

Presently a soft voice came from the hallway, just beyond the apartment door. "Clara?"

"Answer him!" Leopold whispered.

"I'm here, Kurt."

"Are you alone?"

"My lawyer is with me. It's all right."

Leopold crossed the floor and turned the knob of the door, opening it. Then he stood behind it, out of sight, as Kurt Petisi entered.

"Where are you, Clara? I can't see—"

Leopold grabbed him from behind in a bear hug, pinning his arms to his sides as Fletcher dashed forward. *"Kurt!"* Clara screamed, but Molly had a grip on her too.

They wrestled him to the floor and there was a thud as the Cobray fell from beneath his coat. Then Fletcher had the cuffs on him and Leopold turned him over, staring full in his face for the first time.

It was the face of Harold Connex, the gunsmith of Ashtabula.

"Three clues," Leopold said later when Clara had been returned to her cell and Harold Connex had been booked on a murder charge. It was past midnight and Leopold and Molly were with Fletcher in his office. "You might almost call them the clues of age, appearance, and aim."

"You'll have to explain that," Fletcher said.

Leopold settled back in the chair, trying to find a comfortable position. "First, the clue of age. When I met Harold Connex at his gun shop in Ohio, we talked about the weapons Petisi had bought from him. I wanted to know what was involved in converting the Cobrays to fully automatic operation. I wondered if Clara Gomez could do it, and described her as a teenaged girl. A little later in the

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conversation, Connex referred to her as a nineteen-year-old, though I hadn't mentioned her exact age. That told me he probably knew her, or at least knew much more about her than he'd admitted.

"Second was the clue of appearance. Clara's friend Risky French said she'd told Clara she should find someone her own age—implying that Kurt was older—and not fall in love because he looked like a thin Clark Gable. I remembered that Harold Connex was slender, with black hair and a thin moustache. Possibly a little like Clark Gable, though I hadn't thought of it at the time. Putting that together with Connex's knowledge of Clara's age led me to some interesting speculation. Kurt had seemed like the middleman between Connex and Clara as far as delivering the guns to her. But what if Kurt Petisi and Harold Connex were the same person? That would explain why he could only come here every month or two. He hadn't gone on to Boston, he'd returned to his gun shop in Ohio. The sales records he showed me were faked. He never sold those six guns to Petisi because he was Petisi himself. He carried the weapons here in his car. Three of them went to Clara through some arrangement they'd worked out. One was sold to a man named Sam Wantor, and I recovered that weapon. His name can be left out of the report. A fifth Cobray was used to kill Marty Blake and then abandoned."

"Blake could have been shot by either Connex or Clara, though," Fletcher argued. "How do you know it was Connex?"

"Clue number three, aim! The bullets that killed Marty Blake were fired in a straight line across his chest—so straight, Vince told me, that a ruler could be laid over them. I've never fired a Cobray M-11 myself, but I've heard plenty in recent days about how difficult they are to control once they've been converted to fully automatic operation. They kick back and up, spraying the shots. A small young woman like Clara might have the skill to shorten a barrel and otherwise convert the weapon to automatic fire, but she simply would not have the physical strength to hold the gun that level while shooting Marty Blake. It's doubtful if most men could, unless they'd had lots of experience firing them—the sort of experience a gunsmith would have. No, Clara Gomez didn't pull that trigger. Harold Connex is the killer. And if you offer Clara the right sort of plea bargain I'm sure she'll testify that Connex is also Kurt Petisi."

"He was in Ohio," Fletcher said. "How did you get him here tonight?"

"Once I had her handwritten note I sent it to Connex's gun shop by a commercial fax service. I thought it would get him here fast,

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and I allowed more than seven hours if he decided to drive. He came, and that very act verified that he was Kurt Petisi."

Later, when they finally reached home toward morning, Molly said, "I don't know what I expected when I asked you to help out on this case. They lost a good detective when you retired."

Leopold smiled at her. "And you gained one."

DETECTIVERSE

WAIT WATCHER

by AL RONOWSKI

There once was a cop very stout
From dishes like ice cream and kraut.
He retired much later;
Became a star waiter.
Now filet is his only "steak-out."

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THE JURY BOX
by JON L. BREEN

The Edgar Allan Poe Award for best novel, given annually by the Mystery Writers of America, is the most prestigious American prize given for a single work in the crime/mystery/detective genre. As with the other Edgars, its winner is determined by a select committee, usually of five members—and different ones each year, who take on the some-say-impossible chore of considering the whole year's output of mystery fiction published in the United States. The task has become even more daunting given the explosion of publication in the field in the past few years. What book wins, of course, depends upon the tastes of the jurors, and their selections are often subject to controversy. But while there can never be full agreement on what constitutes the best, the Edgar selectors have consistently honored fine books by deserving authors.

The growing quality and influence of regional mystery fiction, specifically novels set in the American South, has been reflected in recent best-novel Edgars. Three of the last four winners—James Lee Burke with *Black Cherry Blues* (1989), Julie Smith with *New Orleans Mourning* (1990), and most recently Margaret Maron with *Bootlegger's Daughter* (1992)—write of Southern backgrounds, with only Lawrence Block's *A Dance at the Slaughterhouse* (1991) upholding the Yankee cause. Perhaps most surprisingly, none of the three Southern winners is set in the Florida drug trade. The only double winner of the best-novel Edgar is Dick Francis, who won for *Forfeit* (1969) and *Whip Hand* (1980). Were it not for this unspoken no-repeater tradition, the latest books from Burke and Maron might well be in the running again.

**** James Lee Burke: *In the Electric Mist with Confederate Dead,* Hyperion, $19.95. Dave Robicheaux, the stand-up police sleuth of New Iberia, Louisiana, confronts a number of possibly related problems: the discovery of the remains of a black man lynched in 1957, a present-day rapist-killer, and the return to the area of gangster Julie "Baby Feet" Balboni, who is bankrolling a movie being filmed locally. While delivering a well-wrought conventional detective story, Burke takes the artistic risk of also introducing a possibly supernatural element: Robicheaux's encounters with the ghost of a Civil War general. Burke is one of the half dozen or so finest stylists in the mystery genre, and this is as good a novel as I've read this year, certainly better than its well-received predecessor, *A Stained White Radiance* (1992). Astonishingly, some early reviewers have found it a *lesser* example of Burke's art—if so, excuse me while I go catch up on his earlier novels.

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**** Margaret Maron: *Southern Discomfort,* Mysterious, $17.95. If Burke represents the masculine South of writers like William Faulkner and John D. MacDonald, Maron's is the feminine South of films like *Passion Fish* and *Steel Magnolias* and the plays of Beth Henley. In this sequel to *Bootlegger's Daughter,* Deborah Knott, as if not busy enough as newly appointed judge in her small North Carolina town, devotes her weekends to WomenAid's all-female house-building project and becomes embroiled in a murder case close to her own large family. Maron, who has been doing good work in the genre for years, has hit her full stride with this series.

*** Donald E. Westlake: *Don't Ask,* Mysterious, $18.95. That very capable but ill-starred crook John Dortmunder and his gang are back in another wild adventure from the mystery genre's premiere humorist. Only one of two Eastern European republics, Tsergovia and Votskojek, will be granted a United Nations seat. Which one gets it hinges on the possession of a religious relic: the femur bone of Saint Ferghana Karanovich (1200-1217?), whose story Westlake interpolates in mock-encyclopedic style (chapter 2A, designated optional and not for credit). Others may try to be this funny over 300 pages plus, but there's only one Westlake.

*** Barbara D'Amato: *Hard Women,* Scribner's, $20. The author's specialty in the series about journalist Cat Marsala is a well-researched specialized background, this time the world of prostitution in Chicago. Early in the going, the journalism threatens to overwhelm the mystery, but in the second half D'Amato delivers a satisfactorily tricky puzzle plot. Anthony Boucher once called Patricia Moyes the writer who "put the who back in whodunit." Barbara D'Amato is one of the contemporaries most determined to keep it there.

** A.W. Gray: *Killings,* Dutton, $20. The latest case for Texas lawyer Bino Phillips has its points—Gray does write well, and there are some humorous scenes, nice character touches, and at least one well-managed surprise—but ultimately they can't counter-balance the book's drawbacks. A serial-killer novel in the graphic and unpleasant vein of *The Silence of the Lambs,* to which it directly refers on occasion, this one lacks the compulsive readability of Thomas Harris's contemporary classic. The set-up of the suspense climax requires some real stupidity on Bino's part. When feminists complain about gratuitous violence toward women, this is the kind of book they are talking about—and when traditionalists bemoan the unnecessary rush to throw the mystery out the window in favor of "pure" suspense, this is also what *they* are talking about.

This department occasionally receives a batch of children's mysteries, including the latest volumes from a pair of established juvenile series, both published by Atheneum. Mary Elise Monsell's *The Spy Who Came North from the Pole* ($12.95), amusingly illustrated by Eileen Christelow, is the third volume about Chicago's rock-hopper-pen-

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guin detective Mr. Pin. Intended for seven- to ten-year-olds, the two tales involve a gargoyle smasher and a slumping Cubs relief pitcher. Their economical style and straight-faced absurdity should delight the targeted audience. Juvie-dipping adults are more likely to join the eight-to-twelves in appreciating Dean Hughes's *Nutty's Ghost* ($13.95), the seventh book about small-town boy sleuth Frederick Nutsell and his genius chum William Bilks. Reluctant movie star Nutty's role in a potentially rotten flick about the "Tae Kwon Do Guy" is menaced by a seemingly shape-changing ghost. Regular series readers may have a better inkling than I did of whether the ghost will prove truly supernatural or be explained in rational terms, but whichever way it swings this is a funny and diverting story.

Gore Vidal, the renowned and reviled playwright, novelist, screenwriter, cultural and literary critic, actor, political candidate, and talk-show guest, was for a brief period also a mystery writer, producing three enjoyable whodunits under the pseudonym Edgar Box: *Death in the Fifth Position* (1952), *Death Before Bedtime* (1953), and *Death Likes It Hot* (1954). Some of his novels under his own name, notably *Burr* (1973) and *Kalki* (1978), at least border on crime fiction. His 1295-page non-fiction collection *United States: Essays 1952-1992* (Random House, $37.50) makes no mention of his Box period and contains relatively little of genre interest, but it does include his entertaining discussion, first published in 1976, of Watergate burglar E. Howard Hunt's fiction.

Serious collectors and scholars of popular fiction will want to acquire *Hawk's Author's Pseudonyms for Book Collectors,* self-published by Martin R. Hawk, 1740 Sunshine Lane, Southlake, TX 76092-9543 ($49.50 hardcover, $39.50 softcover). Drawing on a wide variety of published and unpublished sources and containing 16,689 entries, this is undoubtedly the most extensive work on its subject ever published. To give an idea of the scope of its coverage, the book identifies eleven different bylines used by Bill Pronzini, ten by Dean R. Koontz, thirteen by Robert Bloch, twenty-seven by John Creasey, and no fewer than seventy-one by Lauran Bosworth Payne.

Our occasional award for creative blurb writing goes to the author of the following back-cover copy for the Black Lizard reprint of Harry Whittington's 1958 novel *Web of Murder* (Vintage, $9): "Feverishly plotted, deliciously perverse, *Web of Murder* is *Double Indemnity* on steroids."

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Word just in is that Doug Allyn is to be honored a third time for "Candles in the Rain" (EQMM 11/92), the story that won EQMM's 1992 Readers Award and received a nomination for the prestigious Edgar Allan Poe Award. The Anthony Awards will be given at the Bouchercon World Mystery Convention in October. We congratulate Mr. Allyn on his nomination while we anxiously await the balloting that will determine the winner. He entertains us now with the shortest piece of fiction he has ever written . . .

DANCING ON THE CENTERLINE

by DOUG ALLYN

Paula moved the exit ramp ten feet west along King Avenue, frowning, looking for the perfect spot to breach the freeway wall . . . Perfect. With a ramp speed of fifty-five, vehicles would blend into the freeway traffic without slowing the traffic flow. Rush hour'd be tricky, but . . . A shadow fell across the computer screen.

"What are you working on?" Mendez asked. He was leaning so close she could taste his aftershave.

"The King Avenue overpass," she said, pointedly inching away.

"That's a resurfacing job. Who told you to add those ramps?"

"No one, but federal standards for cities require access every—"

"Don't recite highway codes to me," Mendez growled. "I've read 'em once or twice, the dozen years I've been running this office. Look, you're new, Kelly, so I'll explain this one more time, slowly. The King Avenue overpass is due for resurfacing. Draw me up a work sheet for it. If I want ramps on it, I'll say so. And I'll give the job to somebody with a helluva lot more experience. Understand?"

"No, I don't think I do," Paula said, flushing. "What's wrong with this design?"

"Plenty. For openers, those ramps oughta come out ten, twelve feet farther back, at the intersection."

"Won't work. The exit speeds would be too high."

"Look, *Miz* Kelly, I don't have time to worry about exit speeds on imaginary ramps, okay? I told you to draw up a repair job, not

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redesign the highway system. Think you can handle it?"

"I'm not sure," she said, swiveling her chair, facing him. "Are you ordering me to ignore federal highway standards, Mr. Mendez?"

Mendez straightened, trying to stare her down. He was tall, dark, but not nearly as handsome as he thought he was. She met his gaze, not giving an inch. "Of course not," he said at last. "That'd be unethical. You've got your assignment, Kelly. Do it any way you want." He stalked back to his office and slammed the door. There was a moment of silence, then the office background buzz gradually returned to normal. Paula glanced around but everyone in the roadway design division suddenly seemed very, very intent on their work.

Terrific, two weeks on the job and I've just alienated the one guy I need to impress. She shrugged and turned back to the screen. The new ramps curved as symmetrically as the hips of a violin. Dammit, it's a good design, she thought. The codes require access ramps and the roadway department didn't hire me to fetch coffee—I'm an engineer. Still, she triple-checked every detail of her plan before she printed it out. And then she checked it again.

"First-rate work," Mr. Skinner said, lining up a putt on the carpet in his office. "Couldn't have done it better myself." Skinner was fashionably gaunt, with thinning silver hair, and a mild, father-knows-best manner. Paula felt a flood of relief. When she'd been told to see the division head, she'd half expected a pink slip. "Thank you, sir. I'm afraid Mr. Mendez wasn't very impressed with it."

"And rightly so," Skinner said, glancing up from his putter. "I said it was good, I didn't say it was correct. And I'm also a bit concerned about your attitude toward authority."

"Mr. Skinner, I'm not trying to make waves, but the area around that overpass is poor and densely populated. Access to the freeway would bring the overpass up to federal standards and benefit the neighborhood at the same time."

"The neighborhood?" Skinner chuckled, tapping the ball deftly. It rolled the length of the office and plunked into the cup. "It all seemed so clear in design school, didn't it?" he said, shuffling his feet to align his next shot. "When did you graduate?"

"A few months ago, sir."

"I thought so. Usually when a new man, excuse me, person, joins my division, I invite him for a drink after work to—explain the facts of life. But with all the harassment nonsense going on these days,

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perhaps we'd better chat here. Your design would be all right for a classroom assignment, but you're working in the real world now. Look out of my office window to the south. You can see the King overpass from here."

"Yes sir," she said, moving to the window, "I see it."

"Heart of the Fourth Ward district. Highest crime rate in the city. Flophouses, liquor stores, public housing projects slated for demolition if the gangs don't burn them down first. Sometimes when I work late I hear gunfire down there. Ever been into the Fourth, Miss Kelly?"

"No, sir."

"Very wise. It's dangerous ground for a woman. The freeway runs through it like a river; average speed, seventy-four point six miles per hour. A few years ago the city built a ten-foot wall along the roadway. For noise abatement, they said. But we both know why that wall's really there, don't we, Miss Kelly?"

"Yes, sir, I suppose so."

"Good, then you also understand that the city has no interest in building freeway access ramps in the Fourth Ward. Nobody commutes to work from the Fourth, Kelly, they're all on welfare."

"Maybe if they had easier access, more people could find work."

"Don't be naive. We can't solve ghetto problems with a couple of strips of concrete, and we might make them worse. If I submit your design, the city council may well split along racial lines. And even if they approve it, the 'dozers will be tearing up the area and disturbing things all summer. The Fourth Ward could explode."

"I . . . understand what you're saying, but I'm not sure it's proper for us to make that decision behind closed doors."

"Perhaps not," Skinner said grimly, joining her at the window. "Unfortunately, most political decisions have to be made this way. You know, a few years ago I saw an odd thing down there. A wino took the service stairs down from the overpass and wandered onto the freeway. During rush hour. And he was dancing. The old fool was actually dancing on the centerline, dodging traffic like a toreador. Not a care in the world. Until he stumbled."

"What happened?"

"He stepped off the line, must've been hit by a dozen cars. No one stopped. I doubt they even saw him. In a way, this city's in the same position as that wino. We're dancing on a centerline, too. As long as we stay on it, no one gets hurt."

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"But Mr. Skinner, if I ignore federal codes and anything happens, I could be cited. I could even lose my license."

"You're being paranoid. You must know how unlikely that is."

"But that's just it, I don't know. I'm new to all this, Mr. Skinner, and frankly I'm afraid of making a mistake. Could you perhaps give me a note for my files asking me to amend the design? I'll delete the ramps, end of problem."

"That would put me in rather an awkward position, Paula. Mendez made a simple request. Isn't it your duty to honor it?"

"Duty?"

"Your obligation to your superiors, to Mr. Mendez and me. You do work for us, after all."

"Sir," she said carefully, "I was under the impression we all work for the people of this state."

He eyed her a moment, reading her like a stranger. "So we do, my dear," he said at last. "I believe I see the problem now. In my experience, women define matters of duty quite differently from men."

"I don't understand."

"I'm sure you don't, which is my point exactly," he said, lining up his putter for another shot. "I'm glad we had this little chat, Paula. Have a nice weekend. That'll be all."

On Monday morning Paula found her work area empty. Everything was gone, her notes, files. Even the computer had been replaced.

"Congratulations," Mendez said, slouching against the divider.

"I don't understand," Paula said. "Have I been fired?"

"Au contraire," Mendez said, "promoted. You're not a bad worker, Kelly, but since we can't seem to hit it off, I asked the old man to move you up. As of Wednesday morning, you're a new assistant director of parks planning. Your own office, even a little salary jump. How's that grab you?"

"I don't know," she said.

"Don't know? Heck, you oughta be grateful. Maybe you and I could celebrate. Go out to dinner. Or something."

"Terrific idea," she said evenly. "Why don't I call your wife? We can make it a foursome. With my mom."

"You know, you've got a real attitude problem, Kelly," Mendez said, annoyed. "You need to learn to get along with management."

"I'll try harder, Mr. Mendez. On my new job. Where are my files?"

"In storage. You won't need 'em to design rest stops."

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"I see. And what am I supposed to do until Wednesday?"

"Anything you like. Just do it somewhere else, okay? Some guys have worked here five years without a promotion. They're a little ticked at the way this thing came down."

"Right," Paula said. "I know the feeling."

Pam, pam, pam! The sound of the basketball ricocheted around the walls of the deserted employees' gym. Paula crouched with her back to the basket, dribbling fiercely, bobbing, weaving, timing her moves. The imaginary guard on her right snatched at the ball. Paula pivoted, shot the gap, and drove hard for the basket. Her shot banged off the backboard. Too high. Damn!

She rebounded the ball and tried a hook shot. *Swish!* All net. Better. Not good, but better. She dribbled back out to the free-throw line and set herself again, bobbing, waiting for a gap to open . . .

Someone was watching. Paula sensed it like a trickle of ice water between her shoulder blades. A woman was eyeing her from the gym doorway. Elegant, fortyish, in a tailored gray business suit that matched her close-cropped auburn hair.

"Nice move," she said. Low voice. Lauren Bacall baritone.

"I played my way through college," Paula said. "Half scholarship at State. Want to play some one-on-one?"

"No, thanks. You're much better at games than I am. I'm Harriet Shane, director of budget and management. You're Paula Kelly, right? The new assistant director of parks planning?"

"Guilty as charged," Paula said. "I'd shake hands but I'm sweaty as a horse. How are you, Miss Shane?"

"Surprised. Frankly, I expected you to be a bubble-headed gum-chewer, Kelly. You don't strike me as the bimbo type."

"I'm not. Is that what people are saying?"

"There's some office chatter about sleeping your way up the pay scale," Shane said. "I didn't buy it."

"No? Why not?"

"Elementary, my dear Kelly," she said, smiling. "If Mendez was scoring with you he wouldn't promote you, he'd keep you around. And Frank Skinner swore off women twenty years ago after his first wife took off for parts unknown with her golf pro. You seem angry about what's happened. Why?"

"Because I don't understand it. Mendez asked me to change a design and Mr. Skinner backed him up. I was willing to do it, all I

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wanted was a memo to cover my tail. Instead, they promoted me out of the department."

"And quite possibly out of a job."

"What do you mean?"

"They've pulled this stunt before. Your new boss at parks is one of Mendez's cronies. If things follow the same pattern he'll fire you in a few weeks as an attitude case, and Skinner and Mendez second the motion. You're being set up, Kelly."

It was true. Paula could read it in her face. "My God," she said slowly. "But why on earth would they want me fired?"

"You tell me. Have you been sexually harassed?"

"Not really. Mendez comes on a little strong, but nobody takes it seriously. Not even him. And all Mr. Skinner seemed worried about was ghetto politics and my sense of duty."

"Duty?"

"By his definition, duty means saluting smartly and marching off a cliff. He thinks women come up short in that department."

"I hope he's right. But to be fair, maybe he's entitled to an attitude." Harriet shrugged. "When his wife and her boyfriend split, she left their brain-damaged son behind for Frank to raise alone. Never so much as sent the kid a birthday card."

"Ouch. That's really cold."

"I'd say so. She didn't strike me as that sort, but I only met her once or twice. You can't always tell about people."

"Well, I'm sorry Frank's wife stiffed him, but I was roughly six years old at the time and I'd rather not take the heat for it."

"Nor should you. What was the design they wanted changed?"

"Nothing heavy. I wanted to bring an overpass in the Fourth Ward up to federal standards by adding access ramps. Mr. Skinner said it might cause political problems but I got the feeling there was more to it. Maybe it would affect property values or something. Hell, I can't even check my drawings. They cleared out my office and stored my files over the weekend."

"Mmmm, that is a problem. The storage room's kept locked. Of course, department heads like myself have keys." She slid a key off a gold chain. "Oops, clumsy me, I dropped it. If you happen to find it, bring it by my office. At your convenience."

"I'll be glad to," Paula said warily. "But, ahm, pardon my paranoia, Miss Shane, why are you helping me?"

"Partly the old girl network, but mostly for personal reasons. Skinner pushed a friend of mine, Ronny Harris, out of his depart-

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ment a few years ago exactly this way. I thought at the time it was because Ron was gay. Are you, by any chance?"

"No."

"Then it has to be something else. Let me know if you turn anything up. Maybe I can help."

"Thanks. For everything."

"You're welcome. And Paula, don't worry about being paranoid. For working girls in a man's world, it's the perfect mind-set."

"Miss Shane," Paula said, rapping lightly on the open office door. "Did you lose a key? I found it in the gym."

"Come in and close the door," Shane said. "Any luck?"

"Some. I managed to locate my files but my designs for the overpass were missing. I also found your friend Harris's files. Most of his plans are gone but I found a reference to the overpass in his day sheet. Was he working on the same project?"

"I don't know," Shane said. "But even if he was, why should that get either of you fired?"

"Because I think history is repeating itself. That overpass has been resurfaced twice since it was built, and according to the records the same engineer did the work both times. Mendez. But I'm betting that your friend Harris began the job last time and tried to bring the overpass up to code. And so Mendez squeezed him out."

"But why?"

"To cover for his boss. Skinner drew up the designs for that overpass twenty years ago. And his original plans included the access ramps. He deleted them midway through the construction."

"Am I missing something?" Shane frowned. "Why the fuss over a couple of ramps?"

"I think he got political pressure to keep the Fourth Ward isolated. He hinted as much. But if it came out that they deliberately ignored federal standards to play politics, the fallout could cost him his license. So he's been quietly covering it up ever since. With a little help from his friends."

"What are you going to do?"

"For openers, assemble some proof. I copied Skinner's original plans and the data on traffic flow. I'll need photographs of the area and time on a drafting computer to replicate my design."

"You can use my department's computer after hours. We even have a camera you can borrow. Anything else?"

"No, except to thank you for your help."

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"There is one small favor I'd like in return, Kelly. If you go public with this to save your job, I want you to tell Frank who helped you. And why. I want him to know it was a payback, and that he got it the old-fashioned way. He earned it."

Paula parked her yellow Camaro at the 7-Eleven store beside the overpass. The store was the only viable business in sight, and its windows were armored with black steel mesh. Two young studs in gang colors eyed her from across the street, then moved on.

She took a half dozen photos of the overpass from varying angles. All she needed were a few shots from below.

The safety doors to the freeway service stairs had long since been torn off. The dank, graffiti-scarred stairwell was lit by a single bulb and traffic noise echoed from below like the howl of a great beast. She took a deep breath, then trotted down the steps.

At street level the din was incredible, six lanes of rush-hour traffic blazing past at seventy-plus, engine noise and windblast reverberating off the overpass walls. Paula switched on the camera's flash unit and took two shots of the overhead supports from the doorway. Then she forced herself to sidle away from it, scuffling through trash and broken glass in the twelve-inch safety lane, her back pasted to the poured-concrete wall as traffic hurtled past at warp speed.

Twice she raised the camera, only to have the blast from a passing car ruin the shot. She was trying to time the traffic, hoping to squeeze in a shot between vehicles, when the stairwell entrance darkened.

Frank Skinner was framed in the doorway, tie askew, hair disheveled from the windblast. "What are you doing out here?" he shouted over the roar.

"Covering my tail," she shot back. "What about you?"

"I saw your car from my office and I was afraid you might get hurt down here. Look, this is crazy, we can't talk here. Whatever the problem is, we can work it out."

"I'm willing to listen," Paula said. She began edging toward him, but there was something about his stance in the doorway . . .She hesitated. "Wait a minute. What do you mean you saw my car from your office? How could you be sure it was mine from that distance?"

"I . . . saw you getting out of it."

"No," Paula said slowly, "you couldn't have. I've only been here a few minutes. You couldn't have gotten here so quickly. Unless you were following me."

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"Don't be ridiculous. I saw you and I was worried about you, that's all. Now let's go back. It's not safe down here."

"No, it's not. And yet here you are. You've gone to a lot of trouble over this, Frank. Firing Harris, then jerking me around on the job, and even following me down here. Why? What's so special about a ghetto overpass?"

"I've told you. City hall doesn't want things stirred up down here."

"You know, I almost bought that explanation. Until I found out you dropped the ramps from your own plans twenty years ago. City hall's changed hands a half dozen times since then. And a guy as clever as you are could have fixed the problem somewhere along the line. Instead you've been guarding this overpass like the Taj Mahal. What's buried here, Frank? The crown jewels?"

She'd meant it as a joke, but he blanched as though she'd struck him. A truck roared past, the windblast rocking them both. And for an instant Paula glimpsed a flash of metal along his pantleg. He was holding a golf club half-concealed behind him. She glanced up, and their eyes met. And she instinctively began backing away from what she saw there.

"Where do you think you're going?" he shouted. "Come back!"

"No," she said, still retreating. "My God, something is buried here, isn't it? What have you done, Frank? What is this place?"

"A grave, damn you!" he roared, edging rapidly out of the doorway, eyes wild, his back against the wall. "I buried my wife and her lover right in the path of your damned ramps. It was dark, I got confused. And then I had to change everything to cover it up. I asked you to let it be, Paula. I all but begged. You wouldn't listen to me. Any more than *she* did!" He lunged at her, swinging the club savagely at her head.

She ducked under the blow, hurled the camera at him and plunged through a break in traffic out to the white line. Rubber howled as a gravel truck veered wildly to avoid her, slamming into the overpass wall in a shower of sparks. She heard a cry, glimpsed Skinner's crumpled figure tumbling beneath the wheels as the truck roared past. No time to look. Or to be afraid. She was weaving like a toreador, dancing on the centerline in a thundering river of steel, praying for a gap to open, for a chance to break to the basket. ●

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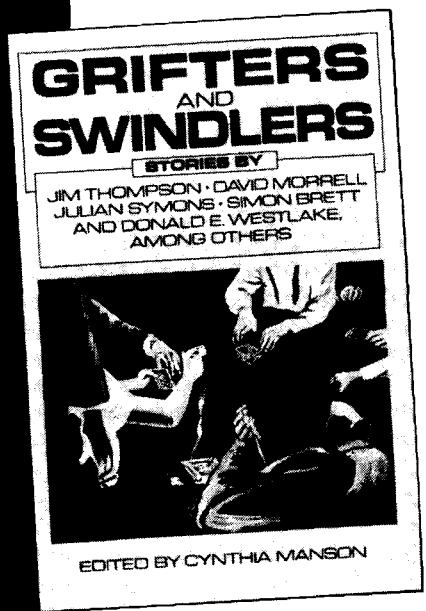
THE BEST OF THE LOWLIFE
GRIFTERS AND SWINDLERS

Edited by Cynthia Manson



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a *NEW* short story by

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Famed for his contributions to spy fiction, which include the modern classic The Mask of Dimitrios, *Eric Ambler has also produced many first-rate stories and books in other areas of the crime field. The story that follows is full of the kind of realistic detail for which he is known . . .*

THE ONE WHO DID FOR BLAGDEN COLE

by ERIC AMBLER

Felix Everard Cole, the English painter who signed himself Blag or Blagden Cole, has been dead for over sixty years; yet only now is he beginning to be recognised as one of our century's masters. The catalogue notes of last year's retrospective at the Royal Academy attempted somewhat obscurely to explain the delay.

"He was a draughtsman to be compared with Constantin Guys, whom Monet admired and whose praises were sung by Baudelaire. As a painter he developed, as did other young Post-Impressionists of the Julian school, in the long shadow cast by Puvis de Chavannes, but he soon became drawn to the Intimisme of Vuillard. He even studied for a while with the Synthetiste Paul Sérusier, an influence that may have contributed to the later richness of his palette and the charm of his Bonnard-like interiors. Nonetheless, it was as a portrait painter that he fulfilled himself; and it was, perhaps, his commercial success as a theatrical portraitist that suspended and then postponed judgement on his work as a whole. He died, absurdly and mysteriously, at the height of his powers." And so on.

Now, God help us, there is to be an official biography.

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There is nothing absurd about a shotgun blast at close range. The note writer is wrong, too, about the dangers to a painter of commercial success. Those who deal in the reputations of dead artists—art historians, curators, senior auction-house appraisers—are rarely moralists, but they are inclined to take themselves and their work seriously. They despise the snap judgements of popular taste. They hate to see art written about and hear it spoken of as if it were a branch of show business or the women's fashion trade. They are intellectual snobs, of course, but they are not fools. In our day there have been few good artists who have been able to avoid the attentions of the press or tried very hard to do so. Publicity has usually brought work. But the young Blagden Cole had sometimes gone too far. He had seemed to court publicity and controversy for their own sakes. Moreover, he did so at a time before the 1914–18 war when popular newspapers were building national circulations. Their stock-in-trade was the common touch, but the touch had to be firm and sure of itself. To the fringe editorial staff of Harmsworth's *Daily Mail,* informed jokers like Blag Cole were invaluable. When Blag made fun of Clive Bell and the Contemporary Art Society, readers could understand the jokes. When Bloomsbury hit back by describing Blag Cole's talent as "the fine commercial knack of making rich grocers look interesting" the *Mail* printed that too. Some of its keenest readers were grocers. All Blag achieved was notoriety.

It was about then that he took to signing his work "Blag." He had never liked his given names. His mother had been a music teacher and the Felix had been her salute to the memory of Mendelssohn, one of her favourite composers. Blagden was her family name and Blagden Cole looked and sounded more interesting than Felix Cole. The abbreviation to Blag developed after the death of his sister Cécile, named after the other favourite composer Chaminade. Blag liked the abbreviation pronounced with a long *a,* as in the French word *blague,* meaning a bad joke or trick. He made other enemies in those early years, and not just in Bloomsbury. Appointed as war artist to the British expeditionary force on the Salonika front, he was the direct cause of a diplomatic incident.

The Army of the Orient based on Salonika was a multinational force. Besides the two British divisions, mostly survivors of the Gallipoli campaign, there were French, Serbian, Italian, and Greek troops. The army commander was General Sarrail, an affable Frenchman with a soldierly bearing and a taste for political intrigue. He lived in a small palace in some state with his mistress,

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a Russian princess of great beauty with an astonishing taste in hats. The troops lived in tented camps among the malaria swamps of the Vardar valley with sandfly fever and dysentery for company. A large Bulgarian army was dug in on the heights above and, although most of the allied casualties were caused by disease, Bulgarian sniper fire added substantially to the account. Morale was low; the troops thought of themselves as forgotten, and not without reason.

The nearest the general ever went to a forward area was the Cercle Militaire, a French officers' club near their corps HQ. It was at this club that Blag heard from a correspondent of the Havas news agency about a review of troops planned for the Fourteenth of July. It was expected that, despite advice from Paris that the lady was spying for King Ferdinand of Bulgaria, the general's noble mistress would be beside him on the reviewing stand. Photographers would be forbidden but who would notice a sketch artist in British uniform sitting on the edge of the parade ground?

No one did, and the pen-and-ink drawing Blag made from his sketch was smuggled to the Havas office in Paris via the Italian diplomatic bag. The magazine *L'Illustration* gave it a full page. They dared to publish it partly because it was strongly reminiscent of Guys at his best, partly because Havas had declared (truthfully) that none of the allied censors in Salonika had objected to the work, and partly because it was felt that Clemenceau, the new prime minister, would not object to British criticism of a French general whom he was known to despise.

The drawing shows Sarrail taking the salute at a march past of high-stepping Senegalese infantry. He is standing, hand at kepi, in an open horse-drawn carriage. Hovering over him, however, are the plumes of an enormous hat, that of his princess. She is standing slightly behind him in all her statuesque glory, protecting him from the sun with her parasol. The drawing has a caption in English: "General Sarrail reviews his presidential guard." It is signed "B. Cole '17."

Unfortunately, Clemenceau did object, strongly. The British prime minister had chosen that moment to write to him personally about Salonika. Not only did he question Sarrail's fitness for command (as everyone else did) but he had also had the impertinence to suggest that the British and French colonial components of the Army of the Orient would be better employed on the Western front in place of the French divisions there which had recently mutinied. Coming on top of the Blag drawing, with its insulting use of the

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phrase "presidential guard," the whole affair looked like a planned provocation and an attempt to humiliate France. French intelligence agreed and blamed the British secret service in Athens. Who but the British could employ their official war artist in Greece to discredit their French ally?

Blag was threatened with a court-martial, but lied his way out of it. His story was that he had been asked to do the drawing by the French Cercle Militaire to hang with other pictures on the wall of their barroom, and since he was an honorary member of the Cercle he had been glad to do it. He had not been paid for the drawing. Its removal to France and reproduction in *L'Illustration* had nothing to do with him. The British force commander, himself an occasional guest at the Cercle, confirmed the findings of a Court of Inquiry in Blag's favour. He had escaped the military danger, but the offence given had been almost wholly political and the politicians were not disposed to let the prank go unpunished. His accreditation as an official war artist was withdrawn and he was sent home.

There Sir Alfred Harmsworth had been translated into Lord Northcliffe and his *Daily Mail* had become a power in the land. Blag's old editorial acquaintances were not really pleased to see him, even when he told them the truth about the Sarrail affair. The word from on high was that he should be regarded as Bolshie, a new term then used to describe those likely to become mutinous. Besides, Sarrail had already been replaced by General Franchet d'Espèrey, who didn't live in a palace with a Russian mistress. Blag was advised to watch his step and do something ostentatiously patriotic, like a royal portrait. No, of course he couldn't get a commission to paint royalty just at the moment. The black mark would have to fade. Perhaps he should volunteer to do war work of some sort, for the Society of Friends, maybe, or the Red Cross.

He seemed struck with the idea and asked for an introduction to a committee member of the Red Cross. They gave him one. The result, however, was not at all what they had expected. When Blag had been sent home he had taken all his sketchbooks with him. Nobody had tried to stop him taking them, not even the censors at base. So now he took the sketchbooks to the Red Cross. He had an offer to make and a proposal. If the Red Cross committee would choose one hundred sketches from the hundreds in the books he, Blag, would make a hundred finished pictures of them. Most would be on double demy board, some line-and-wash, some gouache, some

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pastel. With the hundred pictures the Red Cross could mount an international fund-raising exhibition.

That it was such an extraordinary success was only partly due to Blag and his work. Timing and the fortunes of war were on his side, for it was in the late summer of 1918 that the forgotten Army of the Orient came into its own. The faces of the men Blag had sketched in 1917 were the faces of those who next year fought their way through the Balkans to the first Central Powers surrender of the war. There were the faces of Frenchmen and Englishmen, of Chasseurs Alpins and South Wales Borderers, of the Scottish Brigade and Moroccan Cavalrymen, of pilots of the 47th Squadron RAF who won the Kosturino Pass, and spahis watering their horses in the Struma River. The exhibition catalogue became a collector's item and sold well at charity auctions. Blag's name became very well known. An eccentric British peer tried to sue him for unlawfully disposing of Crown copyrights. The French gave him a Légion d'honneur. In London he was offered accreditation as an official artist to the Paris Peace Conference. He refused on the grounds that the spectacle of allied politicians drawing battle maps for the next war was a job for a caricaturist. He was going back to painting portraits.

And he did. By the twenties he was, undeniably, the most fashionable portrait painter. He also dabbled in the theatre. He designed a ballet for Diaghilev and collaborated with Komisarjevsky in the design of a production of *Peer Gynt*. He experimented with lithography. It is possible that he did too much and that some of his work then did not show him at his best. Most of it did, though, and in the last year of his life he was certainly at his best. He did indeed die "at the height of his powers." It has been only the manner and mystery of his death that have obscured the fact. But the work has survived that long expert scrutiny and his reputation is at last secure. His messy death is no longer seen as an admission of artistic failure comparable with that of Benjamin Haydon. It is now seen as an act of voluntary euthanasia committed to terminate a life of mental suffering which had become intolerable.

Seen by the pundits, that is. But not by the biographer. Now, all the old lies and the old agonies are to be dredged up and picked over again by this youthful, less fastidious seeker after truth. She says that, as the only surviving witness and as the subject of the last portrait Blag painted, I have a moral duty to unburden myself.

She does not say "spill the beans"; but that is what she means. I have been expecting something like this to happen ever since the

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picture with that telltale date on it turned up at Christie's last year and fetched that huge price. I had been hoping, in the way the old do, that I would be dead before someone started asking questions and that my executors would be left to cope. But the biographer invites me to "unburden myself." Some years ago a publisher asked me to write a piece about Blag's last days and I refused easily. I am a truth-teller of sorts but the theatre is my medium. Still, there is a need in the old to unburden which can become as urgent as the need to confess guilt.

As a boy I knew Blag as a friend of the family. After my father died Blag became for a few weeks a benefactor.

My parents were actors, Harry and Kitty Blagden, and they spent most of their working lives on tour or in provincial rep. My brother and I lived with Grandma Blagden in Clapham. It was there, when our parents were at home resting, that we heard all the gossip. In the autumn of 1919, after the treaty of Versailles was signed, they were in Birmingham doing a season of rep. One of the plays was Ibsen's *Ghosts,* still a very daring play then. My mother played Regina and my father Pastor Manders. The local bishop preached against it. It was quite a hit. The theatre was next door to a municipal art gallery and the curator there was stagestruck. It was he who made the connection between Blagden Cole and the production of *Ghosts* with my parents in it. Part of the gallery was devoted at the moment to an exhibition of modern portraits and among them was a portrait of his mother by Cole. The picture was signed but not dated. What only the curator knew was that on the back of the canvas were scrawled the words, "Portrait of Mrs. Alving by her son Oswald." That was dated 1912.

That was the year *Ghosts* had its first public performance in a London theatre and audiences had been deeply shocked. The subject of hereditary disease had, until then, been strictly taboo. Ibsen used it as a symbol for moral corruption, but the disease he had had in mind was generally assumed to be congenital syphilis. An artist who signed a portrait of his mother as Mrs. Alving's doomed son Oswald was making a harsh statement. My father already knew Blag well. They had met in the dog days of 1917 at the base hospital in Salonika, my father a convalescent subaltern in the Welsh fusiliers. He had become friendly enough with Blag and one of the doctors there to know that Blag believed himself the potential victim of a disease that "ran in the family."

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In Birmingham my parents tried to persuade the rep management to forget the curator's amusing little discovery, but in vain. Blag was news and they could use the publicity. A London paper picked up the story from the local rag and asked Blag to comment. He denied all knowledge of the *Ghosts* inscription on the portrait and wasn't too sure that he remembered the portrait itself. He would ask his mother what had happened to it. But he was delighted to hear that his old army pal Harry Blagden had survived the war. No, no relation but the same family name. A fine actor, Harry. He himself meant to go up and see the play.

He went the following week. It wasn't *Ghosts* he saw, but the Frederick Lonsdale comedy that alternated with it. For that my father was thankful. He had not believed Blag's denial of the *Ghosts* inscription. He knew that for Blag 1912 had been a bad year in more ways than one. He had heard Blag telling a friendly doctor all about it in the Salonika hospital. During the year ending in the spring of 1912 Blag's sister Cécile had died in a mental home; and Blag had witnessed the process of her dying. The thought of Blag sitting in the stalls watching the final scene of *Ghosts,* with Oswald centre stage, deserted by Regina and watched only by his mother, crying out for the sun as he sinks into imbecility, would have been unbearable.

My mother liked Blag from the first. "They talked about the war, of course, and about amoebic dysentery and malaria being better for an actor than losing an arm or a leg. But Blag knew why your father wasn't playing leads. He knew that Harry's illness was worse than serious. He said that we Blagdens ought not to trust army medical boards. He said that the only medicine they understood was a disability pension table. He was right, too. He knew all about the Blagden families and which lot came from where. His came from Lancashire. Your father's came from Yorkshire via London, as you know."

"But Blagden was his mother's family."

"His father had no family to speak of. Anyway he was no good. When Blag was only six Mr. Cole ran off to America without a word and died there. Old Mrs. Cole made a living of sorts teaching music but it was the Blagden drapery business that paid most of the bills. That's how Blag started as an artist, you know. He went to a Manchester art school to learn textile design."

"Was his father an artist, the one who ran away?"

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"Not him. He was a piano tuner by trade. I think he sold insurance too, as a sideline. Blag doesn't like talking about him."

That was just after my own father died in 1922. It was the undiagnosed diabetes that killed him, not the ailments they had been treating him for. Not that it would have made any difference. Insulin was discovered just too late to help him. It was a terrible year, but it became a year of decision. Granny couldn't keep house for all of us with no money coming in. Mother had marvellous legs and could move beautifully on a big stage. She had been asked to go into panto before but couldn't because of my father. Now she accepted.

Her first principal boy was Prince Charming in the Moss Empire production of Cinderella at the Grand, Leeds. And that was when we discovered what a good friend Blag could be. The show was rehearsed in London but dress-rehearsed in Leeds. Blag talked to the London management's publicity people and arranged to attend the Leeds lighting and dress rehearsals. There he did croquis and drawings of all the principal actors. They were the sort of drawings and sketches that Lautrec might have done—simple, sad, and wonderfully elegant. The drawing of Kitty Blagden as Prince Charming was particularly fine. It was published with a page to itself in the *Bystander,* a London magazine that reported the doings of the smart set and the bright young things. Her agent always said that it was his astute use of the Prince Charming drawing that promoted her from the provinces to the West End stage. Agent or no agent, she began to get flattering work in musical comedy and then in a series of Charlot revues. Blag lived in the country just outside London and for a year or two we saw quite a lot of him. It was my younger brother who had the temerity to ask one evening, after Blag had taken her to lunch at the Savoy, if they were going one day to get married.

If I had dared to ask such a question I would have been damned for my impudence. My brother was only told not to be silly and to go and do his homework. My grandmother had gone to her Thursday whist drive. We were sitting at the kitchen table where I had supper and my mother had tea and a sandwich before leaving for the theatre. When my brother had gone she gave me a look.

"Did you put him up to that, Charlie? No? Then what's he been reading? Peg's Paper?"

"He asked me, I didn't know what to say. I still don't."

"Well, I suppose I'd better tell you. The answer is no. Blag would like to get married but not to his old friend's widow, even if she were

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willing. What he needs is a young wife who'll give him a good time. He could have that, but that's not what he wants. What he wants is a young wife who'll give him children. And that he can't have—mustn't have."

"Sins of the fathers? Ghosts?"

"Not the sins that you mean. There are other things besides VD that people can inherit. Things that run in a family for generations, like red hair or blue blood. Only some of them are killers. The one waiting for Blag is called Huntington's chorea and I'd rather not talk about it at table."

"You said that it's waiting for him. Does he know?"

"He can't know for certain. It got his father when he was in his forties. The father's mother died of it while he was still an infant in arms. Blag's sister was just thirty. He's lasted the longest. If it was only syphilis he could have a blood test and know. But there's no test for Huntington's and he could still be a carrier. There's no need to tell your brother all this, of course. Heaven knows what fairy tales he'd invent. Your father told me most of it." She glanced at her watch. "Which reminds me. About a year ago Blag sent your father the synopsis of an idea for a play. If it survived the nursing home tidy-up he'd like it back. But I'm not going to go through your father's papers. You're the man of the house now. You find it. It'll be in one of the big suitcases. I must be off, I'm late already."

I found it eventually, between his army papers and a war diary. It was written on two pieces of Elm Park Farm letter paper. The provisional title of Blag's play was *A Respectable Woman's Guide to Murder* and it was based on the life of Madeleine Smith. She was tried in 1857 for poisoning her lover, escaped the gallows by looking invincibly respectable, and lived happily ever after, with a succession of legal husbands, until well into the nineteen twenties. What caught my eye first, however, was the folded paper to which the synopsis had been pinned. When unpinned and unfolded this turned out to be an art gallery reproduction of Toulouse-Lautrec's famous poster portrait of the cabaret singer Aristide Bruant. In the margin there was a scribbled note in Blag's writing.

"You asked why I never did self-portraits. Here's one reason. I never saw Bruant or heard him sing and I never wore a big black cape with a red scarf like this. Far too actory. But I must admit to finding that somewhat Napoleonic profile an astonishing likeness. More so as I grow older."

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And it was indeed an astonishing likeness. No doubt the cape was a prop designed to conceal short legs and a pot belly. Blag didn't need it. He was tall and lanky. The Bruant profile, though, was just right. I went back to the play synopsis. On a space at the foot of the second page my father had pencilled a note.

"Madeleine Smith is an interesting subject and there have been several attempts to dramatize her. At the moment, I hear, a Hollywood producer wants to make a film about her. She objects. She now lives in America, is over ninety, still highly respectable, and will have the law on anyone who says different. Better wait a bit. The theme will keep."

I put the synopsis in an envelope, addressed it to Blag at Elm Park Farm, near Pinner, Middlesex, and wondered if I could find some inexpensive way of delivering it in person instead of sending it by post. I had always been curious about Elm Park Farm. My mother had spent weekends there and had been very enthusiastic. "It's neither a park nor a farm," she had explained once, "but it used to be both. Now, it just shows you what a good architect can do with a walled garden, a Victorian stable yard, and a fire-gutted Regency house." For guests it was "deliciously comfortable," though she didn't much care for old Mrs. Cole, the "eternal music teacher." However, Aunt Alice, her sister, wasn't a bad sort, "Tweedy. Plays golf."

Luckily, I remembered something else my mother had said. "It's easy to get to. You take the Metropolitan line to Pinner and Blag has a hire car waiting at the station to pick you up. Or you can go to Rickmansworth and get a country bus." I posted the synopsis with the Lautrec repro to Blag and consoled myself with my father's diary.

It wasn't really about the war; it was about the efforts of a professional actor with a "hostilities-only" commission in the fusiliers to run an army divisional concert party in northern Greece. This was between courses of treatment at a military field hospital. There were long lists of names taken at auditions, with comments on the participants—mostly *nbg*. There were the occasional discoveries—"Cpl Hughes R. fair baritone, better pianist, can sight-read and transpose." The times he spent in hospital seemed, on the whole, more enjoyable. The doctors had a mess tent to themselves which he was allowed to use; an actor who can tell funny stories well is always good company. It was there that he got to know Blag, who had done a lot of sketching in the hospital. Blag was popular in the

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mess because he brought the high command gossip he picked up from the Italians and the French. He also liked talking medical "shop." The doctors didn't mind this because, for a layman, he was well-informed, particularly about diseases of the central nervous system. On the subject of childbirth, however, he could make a fool of himself. My father recorded a boozy Burns night dialogue between Blag and the Scottish senior surgeon.

Blag: Jock, I tell you this with my hand on my heart. I was born two months premature and I weighed nine pounds.

Surgeon: You can put your hand where you like, Blag my boy, but you canna have it both ways. Nine pounds you may have been, but if so you weren't premature. Or if you were premature you didna weigh nine pounds. Who told you this fairy tale? A midwife? Ah, those old biddies will say anything if they think you want to hear it.

Blag's reply was to get up from the dinner table and leave the mess without another word. My father noted that this was the only time he saw Blag behave less than well. As it was Burns night, none of the Scots there took any notice. On Burns night anyone was likely to behave badly. "Poor Blag," had been my father's comment, "he must have known the date of his parents' wedding day."

Why poor? In the end I asked my mother. She sighed. "Really, Charlie, I should have thought it was obvious. When there's something that runs in the family, even little things, everyone wants to know what he or she was like as a baby. Even in normal families there's a lot of lies and careful talk about such things. If he was born a nine-pound baby boy, the doctor says, he wasn't premature. So, mother Cole was nine months pregnant with him. She had been pregnant on her wedding day. These things happen all the time. It was a wicked world, Charlie, even in good Queen Victoria's day, God rest her soul. What are you grinning at? It's not funny. Young Emma Blagden, the sprightly little music teacher, had a romp before she was supposed to with person or persons unknown."

"The piano tuner?"

"Who doubled as an insurance agent? The Huntington's carrier? Poor Blag must have hoped that it was someone else. Especially after the death of his sister."

"He could have asked his mother. I mean, she'd have to tell him the truth, wouldn't she?"

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My mother gave me an extra long look. "Tell you what, Charlie," she said, "if you're ever invited to Elm Park Farm and you meet old Mrs. Cole, you can ask her that question yourself."

My younger brother James got to the farm first. Nineteen twenty-six was a bad year for our family. Granny Blagden, whose house we had always lived in, had to go into a nursing home for a minor operation. It went wrong and she died there. Mother was in one show and rehearsing for another. Things had to be done, like paying the nursing home in order to get the death certificate. Blag came to the rescue. He dealt with the nursing home, then took me to the undertakers, who had the body in their mortuary. With them he was equally firm. Just the motor hearse and one car for mourners. A plain oak coffin is what your grandmother would have wanted, eh Charles? and not those fancy bronze handles, please, the ordinary brass ones. He gave the name of his own solicitor in Covent Garden as the one who would be probating the will. He did not mention that she had drawn it up herself on a form bought at the local stationers.

We buried Granny in the morning three days later. When we got back to the house we were joined by Blag's lawyer who said that Granny had read the will form instructions carefully and followed them. The house was the major part of her estate and she had left it to Mother. For her there were two immediate problems. The first was that of finding a live-in cook/housekeeper to replace Granny. The second, to my surprise, was that of my matric. I was due to sit for it in two weeks' time. If I didn't sit for it, my mother declared, and if I didn't pass with honours, I couldn't go to college. She had promised my father that I would do both. She knew of an out-of-work dresser who could be trusted to keep house for a week or two if one strictly rationed the gin. Blag said that, if I were to be kept busy preparing for an exam and keeping an eye on the gin, my brother might like to spend some time at the farm. As it was getting near the end of term, he was sure the school would agree. All James wanted to know was whether there was a piano at the farm. On being told sharply by my mother that Mrs. Cole had two pianos and that if he behaved himself she might let him try the Broadwood grand, James gave Blag a beatific smile. At thirteen my brother was already a practised charmer.

Of course, we all knew by then that he had a musical talent. He wasn't a prodigy, but he was clearly exceptional. Mother knew people at the Guildhall School and the professor who had heard James play had assured her that there would be a scholarship for him a

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bit later on. Obviously, a few weeks in the country playing on a good piano before an audience as experienced and sympathetic as Mrs. Cole (herself a Blagden) would be weeks well spent.

According to James, it was time wasted and a set-back to his career as a musician. The stables, studios, and gardens were all right, spiffing indeed, but Mrs. Cole, Auntie Alice, and their house were all *ghastly*. "Don't misunderstand me, Charlie, it's a very *pretty* place. There's a small river that runs through it with willow trees along the bank and a path to the village. The real farm, the old eighty-one-acre one, is on the other side of the river. It belongs to a real farmer now. The real old house was commandeered in the war as a convalescent home for the shell-shock cases. Jack Hunter says that it was the shell-shock cases who set fire to it on Armistice night."

"Who is Jack Hunter?"

"He was one of the shell-shock patients. He and his wife Annette run the whole place for Blag. Annette does the cooking. She's Belgian."

"What's the cooking like?"

"Oh, I was at Mrs. Cole's house. Auntie Alice does the cooking there. They have a girl in from the village to do the cleaning and the beds. The Lancashire hotpot was all right."

"But not the piano?"

"The piano was all right. It was her. The moment I got there she said she was going to give me lessons. And she'd even bought me a party piece to learn."

"Chopin. Something flashy."

"She gave me a choice. One of Mendelssohn's 'Songs without Words'—she called it 'The Bees Wedding'—or else 'Kitten on the Keys' by Zez Confrey. Auntie Alice had a gramophone record of that. She called it ragtime."

"Which did you choose?"

"Kitten. It's not really difficult, but it does need what Professor Brant calls dexterity. Besides, Mrs. C. wanted me to choose the other one. She's weird. She gives a concert recital every evening at six. She always has the lid of the piano right up and all the windows open. It's always when Blag's walking along the river path to the village pub for a drink. She plays Chaminade's Autumn at him full blast. She says it's to remind him of Cécile. Who's Cécile? He never takes any notice unless he has someone with him, like Jennifer or Rowe. Then he just waves. Jack Hunter shoots the rabbits because

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they're pests. If I were Blag, I'd ask him to shoot her. You know, she even marked the fingering for me on the music."

I asked Mother who Rowe and Jennifer were. My brother had banished Elm Park Farm to an outer limbo.

"Didn't I tell you? One side of the old stables has been converted into two biggish studios with living quarters attached. Tom McGowan has one. He's an engraver and an old friend of Blag's. Jennifer, his daughter, keeps house for him and does a little book illustrating. Nice girl. Lost the boy she was going to marry on the Somme. Ruskin Rowe has the other studio. He's a commercial photographer. Things, not people. Very clever I'm told. It's a bit like a Mayfair mews down there. Without Blag it could get artsy craftsy."

"Where is his studio then?"

"Behind the garden wall. As far away from his mother and his Aunt Alice as he can reasonably be. You'll see. He's bound to ask you down. He said he'd like to draw you. He sees your father in you. So do I, come to that. You've got to go to college."

There was no help for it; I had to work harder. Just over a year later I jumped through the necessary hoops, passed the right exams, and acted my way past an interview board. In September, when I was eighteen, I could go to college and read law at the taxpayers' expense. My mother was very pleased. Since she was in the new Noël Coward revue, she was also disposed to be generous. She bought me some new shirts and underwear and decided that I had grown enough to wear one of my father's Savile Row suits. She also said that when my last term at school ended I should have a holiday. The invitation from Blag came two days later. It was in the form of a job offer, that of temporary assistant gardener. The pay offered was two pounds a week plus bed, full board, and beer money.

"But two pounds is a lot," I protested. "I'm no gardener."

"He knows that, silly. It's just a way of giving pocket money. Besides, think of the food. Annette runs her kitchen like a French bistro. All you'll have to do for yourself is make your bed."

I didn't know what a bistro was, but I soon found that I was going to have a better time at Elm Park Farm than my brother. I had one of the guest rooms built over the old coach house with a view of the river, and its own bathroom next door. It was entered from a balcony that ran the length of the stable yard from the walled garden to "The Lodge," the small house with the clock tower in which the Hunters lived. The balcony was reached by an iron spiral staircase. Blag himself showed me the way.

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"This place is run like a boardinghouse," he explained, "with Annette as the landlady. The studios, mine included, all have their own kitchens, but artists and craftsmen don't always feel like cooking. Some of us aren't very good cooks anyway. Sometimes we prefer to eat in dear Annette's kitchen, which is conveniently next door to The Lodge where you met Jack just now. Lunch is at one o'clock, dinner at eight. Annette doesn't do breakfasts though, just tea and toast. What do you drink now, Charlie? Wine? Beer?"

"I had a glass of sherry last Christmas."

"I ask because I'm in the habit of walking along to the village pub for a drink before dinner. I dare say your brother told you. I'm always glad of company. You're allowed to drink in pubs, aren't you? You're eighteen."

"Almost."

"It's five now. By the time you've unpacked and found a book to read it'll be sixish. I'll give you a shout."

The path along the riverbank was cool and pleasant in the shade of the willows, but as we came abreast of the monkey puzzle on Mrs. Cole's lawn the shade thinned and we had the evening sun directly in our eyes. At the same moment the sound of the piano, of which I had been dimly aware, suddenly became louder. It was the Chaminade all right. I knew because James had picked out the melody on our piano at home the night before. He hadn't wanted me to be caught out if challenged.

Blag wasn't challenging anyone just then, not even his mother. Out of the corner of my eye I saw him raise his arm in acknowledgement of the music as we walked on.

"I dare say your brother told you what to expect," he said.

"Yes, but I thought the music might have changed. That's not the only piece that Chaminade wrote."

"Oh, the music changes from time to time. We had Mendelssohn last week. But it's the same old tune really, if you see what I mean, Charlie. By the way, she rechristened your brother Zez. After the composer of 'Kitten on the Keys.' Did he tell you?"

"No. He's rather touchy about his music. He's going steady with Schumann at the moment."

At the end of the river path there was an iron footbridge across to the farm side of the river. There we joined the cart track that the farmer used to get his milk churns down to the road. Two hundred yards or so farther on another footbridge took us back across the

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river into the rose garden behind the Anglers Rest. There were people sitting at tables on the lawn by the river.

"The flies get in your drink out here," Blag said and led the way inside.

It wasn't a pub but a gentrified village inn with a courtyard in front and cars with chauffeurs waiting. The owners of the cars were standing in the saloon bar drinking pink gin and whisky on their way home from the day's work. Blag nodded to one or two of them as he led the way through to a room labelled Bar Parlour. Here there were tables and chairs and, on the walls, hunting prints and stuffed fish in glass cases. A pretty woman with a nice smile came in to serve us. Her name was Dolly and I was introduced as a kind of nephew.

Dolly beamed. "Are you Kitty Blagden's boy? There was a lovely picture of her in *Play Pictorial* last month. What'll you drink?"

"How about the draught cider?" said Blag.

"The stuff we've got will give him collywobbles. He'd be safer with a nice long Pimm's. We've got fresh borage. Oh, I was forgetting." She pulled a letter out of her apron pocket. "This came for you today by post care of us. Dad said you'd asked him if he minded." She handed him the letter. "Gin and tonic for you?"

"Thanks, Dolly." He looked at the letter. "Sorry, Charlie. I'd better see what this is."

I watched him open it. The address on the envelope was typed. I was puzzled. In those days typewritten letters were not as common as they are now. Even business letters were sometimes written by hand. Love letters always were. But why would the master of Elm Park Farm want to use the Anglers Rest as an accommodation address?

When Dolly brought the drinks Blag had his pocket diary open beside the letter. "I've got a man from Manchester coming down to see me weekend after next," he said. "I can't do with him at the farm. Could you put him up here for a couple of nights? Mr. D. J. Bristow. He's a lawyer, quite respectable."

As we walked back we met Jack Hunter with a shotgun under his arm. He had been a troop sergeant in the field artillery, and in the breeches and leggings which were his weekday work clothes he was still a soldierly figure. He said he was going to shoot rabbits in the farmer's lower field.

"Does he know?" asked Blag.

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"He won't argue. If that cowhand of his can't be bothered to keep the rabbits down he'll be getting no more fresh vegetables from us. It's our cold frames those little bunnies like to get into. Talking of which, Mr. Blag, your Auntie Alice has been practising her mashie shots again. Broke two panes in the tomato house this evening."

"I thought you put up some netting for her."

"She says that's for tee shots, not short approaches. Better watch out as you go by." He nodded to me and went on his way.

I had no trouble identifying Auntie Alice. She was a white-haired, stubby little woman, wearing a pleated tweed skirt, a canary-yellow jumper, and low-heeled brown brogue shoes. She was now practising chip shots from the edge of the lawn. Sitting at a rustic table by the monkey-puzzle tree, and unmistakably mistress of all she surveyed, was Mrs. Cole. Her right hand rested on the tasselled handle of a pink parasol which, as we approached, she raised above her head and brandished slightly as if she were hailing a taxi. It would have been difficult for us to have ignored her.

"Better get it over with," Blag said.

"So this is Zez's big brother Charles," she said as we approached her. "Welcome to Elm Park Farm, Charles Blagden."

"Thank you, Mrs. Cole."

"I never met your father, but your mother says you're like him, just as handsome. Are you musical like your brother?"

"Not in the least, Mrs. Cole."

"Modest as well as handsome. You must come to supper with me, young man."

"That's enough, Em," said her sister firmly, "you're making him blush."

Lancashire still came through clearly in the way Aunt Alice spoke. Mrs. Cole had sounded like a drama-school elocutionist. I was relieved when Blag took charge again and moved us on. Mrs. Cole's affectations on top of the Pimm's and an otherwise empty stomach had given me an uncontrollable desire to belch. Luckily, we were out of earshot before I had to give way. Blag was sympathetic. "You must be hungry," he said. "Annette will soon take care of that."

Leek and potato soup followed by a chicken casserole with braised endives took care of it very well; and the fact that I can still remember after all these years exactly what was cooked should speak for the quality of Annette's cooking. She was inventive, but her dishes were mostly of the pot-au-feu kind, simple but tasty, soups and stews. Since she cooked for so many this was understandable. Her

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"kitchen" was two stables knocked into one big room and it had four small tables in it. These could be placed together and she could seat ten if necessary. Usually there were no more than six or seven including her and her husband Jack. They had no children. The real kitchen, where the cooking was done, was in The Lodge next door; an arched doorway connected the two. A sideboard with spirit lamps and hot plates kept the food warm. Everyone, including guests, helped themselves.

I was the only guest that evening, but all the residents were there. Tom McGowan, the engraver, and his daughter Jennifer sat at the next table, Rowe, the photographer, was by himself, and the Hunters were at the end.

Over the years, the portraits Blag did of Jenny have made her beauty as familiar a measure of that quality as Manet's Olympia or a Rembrandt portrait of Saskia. At the time, I regret to say, all I saw was a pretty woman with a nice smile and a talent for illustrating children's books.

"What are you going to do with yourself down here?" she asked. "In Clapham you could have gone to the pictures twice a day."

"I was hoping he was going to help me plant out the September lettuce," Jack said loudly. "Right, sir?"

"It was discussed," Blag admitted.

"I thought that I was to be allowed to help with the lettuce," said Rowe and sounded as if he really meant it.

"When I reminded you, Mr. Rowe, you said you had a bad back."

"I'm going to be busy with a sitter for the next two days," Blag said. "I'm sure Charlie won't mind giving you a hand, Jack."

"Of course," I said. Everyone smiled. The formalities were over. A temporary assistant gardener had been engaged. Supplies of September lettuce could now be relied upon.

"You're trapped," said Jenny, "mornings from nine to twelve. We can go to the pictures in the afternoon, though, if you like. I can drive us into Rickmansworth."

"What's on there?" her father asked.

"*Scaramouche* with Ramon Novarro."

"Face like a rue Blanche pimp," he said and then turned sideways on his chair to look directly at me. He had a fierce bristly moustache and very sad blue eyes. "I saw a Henry Blagden on the stage just before the war. He played Marchbanks in Shaw's *Candida*. Was that your father?"

"Yes, sir. Did you enjoy the play?"

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"The play, no. Tiresome, I thought. Your father seemed to make sense of it. Curious."

"He told me that he played the long speeches as if he were trying to correct a stammer. It took the literary curse off them."

He grinned. "There speaks the actor." He turned back to his plate.

"Charlie's going to be a lawyer, Tom," Blag said. "His mother thinks he ought to have a trade."

They all laughed a little, as if in disbelief. There was both wine and water on the table. I took a little of each. When I got up to my room that night there was an envelope on the dressing table. In it there was a note with two pound notes folded inside it. The note read: "Congratulations on a skilful performance before a difficult audience. I'll bet you made up that bit about taking the curse off *Candida*—B."

Several days went by before I saw Blag again. His sitter was a distinguished actor/manager who lived in Henley and drove over every day in a beautiful Rolls-Royce coupé de ville, the kind of car in which only the chauffeur and front-seat passenger get rained on. Annette sent lunches of smoked salmon sandwiches and chilled Chablis across to the studio. Blag was doing preliminary sketches. The process could go on for days. In the mornings I worked with Jack Hunter, mostly in the greenhouses. These were on the far side of Mrs. Cole's house, by the vegetable garden where Jack's battle with the farmer's rabbits was fought out. They even got under the wire into the strawberry patch. Jack had to have his shotgun handy. There was a broom cupboard just inside the back door of the house where Auntie Alice cleaned her golf clubs, so he kept the gun there. The boxes of cartridges he kept in a bag hanging behind the door.

The mornings weren't all gardening. Blag had given the Hunters a four-seater Morris-Cowley in which they used to go shopping for the things that couldn't be delivered, like blocks of ice and boxes of kippers from a fishmonger in Pinner, and wine that had to be fetched from a warehouse near Watford. Jack taught me how to lift cases of wine, as he had taught me how to use a heavy shovel, without doing myself a mischief. The afternoons were restful. I read Aldous Huxley's *Chrome Yellow* and browsed through a stack of old London *Mercury*s. To sustain my impersonation of a law student I had bought a copy of Maitland's *Constitutional History* found secondhand at Foyle's, and became quite fascinated by it. And, of course, I went to the pictures with Jenny. She would have gone every day if there had been enough changes of programme within reasonable driving

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distance. We went in Blag's car, the old Crossley tourer that Auntie Alice also drove when she went to her golf club. Jenny was a good driver, but the moment we got inside a cinema she became an emotional mess. At least I thought so. She sympathized with the wrong characters. When we saw *Scaramouche,* for instance, she mooned over Lewis Stone, who played the wicked marquis, wept for the wooden prettiness of Alice Terry as the heroine, and thought nothing at all of Ramon Novarro as the lead. When she had dried her eyes and we were back outside again she seemed quite sensible. I found it disconcerting.

The threatened invitation to supper from Mrs. Cole was conveyed by Jack. I was given a choice, Friday or Saturday, so I asked his advice. "I'd make it Saturday," he said. "On Friday it's only high tea with fish cakes and you get the new curate as well. On Saturday it's always a pie from Fortnum's."

At first it wasn't as bad as I feared. Of course, the recital seemed endless. Raff's "Cavatina" was added to the usual programme for that week. With the Chaminade finale Auntie Alice poured us both another glass of sherry and brought forward her sister's whisky and soda. Grand piano lids are heavier than they look, but Mrs. Cole closed hers with surprising ease. Then, picking up her drink, she sat down with a smile facing me.

"Such a nice cozy woman, your mother," she said. "Has she ever thought of marrying again, do you think?"

I was speechless but Auntie Alice filled in for me.

"That's enough, Em," she said sharply. "We'll have none of that. You promised."

It gave me time to become pompous. "My mother is a highly successful actress," I said, "and a highly respected one. She enjoys her work. She has no intention of marrying again. She has told me so."

"How lucky you are to be trusted with her secrets."

"No more now, Em. It's time for supper."

The pie was all right, but I had no appetite.

The following Saturday Mr. Bristow arrived. Blag sent Jack with the Morris into Pinner to meet him at the station and take him to the Anglers Rest. Annette and I were having tea when Jack returned. The errand had puzzled him. This Bristow had turned out to be a well-spoken north-country officer type. Why did he have to stay at the pub? There was a spare guest bedroom that he could have had. Of course, there was one thing that was odd; the man had two suitcases with him and one of them, the larger, was practically

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empty, as if it had no more than a well-wrapped picture in it. Could it be some work that Mr. Blag had been asked to identify? Bristow could be an insurance investigator, a dealer, or even some kind of policeman.

"Or a lawyer?" I suggested.

"He could be. Naturally Mr. Blag wouldn't want anyone like that in the house."

But Blag had surprises for everyone that day. Towards six o'clock he came out of his studio, banged on the ironwork of the staircase to bring me out, and asked if I fancied a walk to the pub. Jenny was with him, clutching a handkerchief to her breast and looking like Alice Terry on her way to the duel. As I reached the bottom of the stairs she blew a kiss, cried a strangled "Good luck," and ran back to her own studio. "Let's go and have a drink with Mr. Bristow," Blag said.

D. J. Bristow was indeed an officer type, but to my mind more navy than army. He had the smooth pink complexion, the tight blue serge suit, and the starched collar with the skinny black tie. He was sitting at a table in the rose garden with a glass of beer in front of him and he stood up when he saw us approaching. He and Blag shook hands as if they had met before. I was introduced as one of the London Blagdens. Bristow smiled and nodded. "Son of Henry? Yes, I thought so." He turned to Blag. "Is this young man your photographer?"

"No, Charlie's here to lend moral support. The photographer's waiting inside, all ready to go to work making the copies."

Bristow pursed his lips. "Well now. I hope you're not going to be too disappointed, Blag. I was able to bring only one of the pictures. The town clerk was very helpful but it was one or none. You see, these photographs are, in a sense, part of the furniture of the council chamber. They are also of some historical significance. Our man held office as a councillor for eighteen years and there are five group photographs with him in them, the last one dated eighteen ninety-five. He was the architect of the Preston town hall annexe completed in that year. I chose that one to bring because it's the sharpest and because he has more facial hair in the earlier ones."

"I'm sure you did your best."

"It wasn't easy. I had to promise the town clerk that I would have it back in the town hall council chamber by Monday morning. And I had to promise that it would not be removed from its frame. It's glazed of course."

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Blag sighed. "Well, let's go inside and have a look at it."

Rowe was waiting for us in the oak-panelled dining room. Jack was in the Morris outside. Bristow went upstairs to get the picture.

"It's framed and glazed," said Blag, "and must stay that way. Mr. Bristow will not let it out of his sight."

"I've got a polarizing filter that should take care of the glass," Rowe said, "and if the filter doesn't work I'll manage somehow. Is it really valuable?"

"Only to me. You see . . ." He broke off. Bristow had returned. The picture was wrapped in corrugated paper and tied up with tape from a lawyer's office. The frame inside was about twenty inches by twelve, made of ebonised hardwood with gilt beading. A yellowing white mount surrounded the photograph which showed the steps up to the portico of a town hall. Lined up on the steps and standing in two ranks of nine were eighteen gentlemen all formally dressed for the occasion. Some of those in frock coats had muttonchop whiskers. The rear rank stood two steps above the front so that all were clearly visible. Their names were inscribed in copper-plate style in two ranks along the mount below.

"Which is the one we are interested in?" asked Rowe.

Blag reached out and pointed to the second figure from the right in the front row. "That's the chap," he said. "Councillor T. C. Everard. I'd know that face anywhere, wouldn't you? Now let's see if you can blow the good man up. Shall we, Rowe? Eh?"

He was so excited that he could scarcely get the words out. Rowe and Bristow seemed infected too. They bundled the picture back into its wrapping and took it out to the car where Jack was waiting. As they piled into it Blag remembered me and looked back. "Have a strong drink, Charlie," he said. "We'll see you back at the studio." They drove off.

I didn't want a drink but I wanted badly to talk. It was six-thirty on a Saturday, a matinée day then. My mother would be having a sandwich in her dressing room at the theatre. The Anglers Rest had a phone box in the hall. I had the stage door phone number written in my pocket diary, for emergency use.

When my mother discovered that there was no emergency she was cross but prepared to admit that what I had to report was of interest.

"So, it wasn't the piano tuner she had a romp with, but some sparky young architect from the town hall."

"It could be."

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"Who did you expect it to be, the Prince of Wales? I say lucky old Blag. He's found the father he always wanted, the one who wasn't a carrier of Huntington's disease. What do you say?"

"I just hope so."

"What's wrong, Charlie? Speak."

"I think the Lautrec poster of Bruant looks more like Blag than that man in the photograph, Councillor Everard."

"Well, let me tell you something, Charlie. Blag once asked his mother why his middle name was Everard. She told him that it had been a mistake, a clerical error by the parish clerk, who had bad eyesight. She had wanted his middle name to be Erard after the French piano manufacturers from whom her father had bought her first piano. What's more, the late Mr. Cole had served his apprenticeship at Erard's London works. Everard is only an old north-country spelling of the name Edward. Of course she could have been covering up with the wrong spelling story. Are you listening, Charlie?"

"Yes, Mother. Mrs. Cole would be capable of anything."

"Yes, but don't you start getting mixed up in Blag's or Jenny's love lives or start taking sides. Come home if you like. We'll manage. But don't start thinking things over and dreaming up stories like your brother. Promise?"

"All right. But Jack says Blag wants to do a portrait of me."

"I'm sure he'll make you look exactly like your father. Be good, darling." She hung up.

I did not see Blag again for over a week. Jack said that after Bristow had left with his precious picture Blag and the McGowans had gone up to London on business. They were staying at Brown's Hotel, all three of them. I knew about Tom McGowan's business. He had been elected a member of the Academy that year and a Bond Street gallery was giving him a show. The picture framer favoured by the gallery was widely disliked by etchers and engravers for his conceit. The man believed, according to Tom, that a picture frame could have as much as or even more artistic importance than the work it adorned. He looked forward to a hard struggle with the bastard for the integrity of his work. Jenny? Jack thought she would be seeing that publisher of hers, and of course the new films.

The McGowans returned first. Jack met them at the station with the Crossley. They had a festive air about them and that evening at dinner Rowe was bold enough to comment on it. "You've been shopping for a dress," he told Jenny. "I know the look. Is it to be in a church or a registry office?"

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Tom McGowan bridled. "If you knew what a special licence cost, you'd not be asking such a damn fool question."

"Then it's to be a registry office, eh?"

I am sure that neither Jack nor Annette uttered a word to anyone, but the idea of a wedding was now abroad at the farm and the village girl who did Mrs. Cole's housework also went in twice a week to the McGowans. Word must have reached Auntie Alice very quickly.

I knew when Blag was back because I heard the hire car from Pinner drive away and saw a light in the wall door of the studio. When I went down next morning to make myself tea and toast Jack had a message for me. "He wants to work. He'd like you to model for him. Gardening togs. Ten o'clock."

I had been in the walled garden before to do weeding and other odd jobs but I had not seen inside the studio. It was bigger than it looked from the outside. From the inner doorway you saw a deep lofty room with a broad skylight at least thirty feet long, and tall windows with slatted blinds on the garden side. It seemed full of light. There was a tilted drawing table as well as easels and work tables. One of the easels carried a large pin board with drawings and photographs tacked to it. The drawings were mostly sketches of the actor/manager's head and hands and bits of them. The photographs were glossy and more difficult to see from where I stood.

Blag came through a doorway at the other end of the studio. There was a faint smell of cooked kippers. That seemed to be his kitchen, with the bed-sitting room beyond.

"Hallo, Charlie," he said. "Did they get off to the framer's all right?"

"Those boxes of Mr. McGowan's wouldn't all go in the Morris."

"I told Jenny they'd need the big car. Who helped her?"

"Jack and me. Jenny said they'd be back late but not to worry."

"The framer's in Fulham. They're having dinner with Tom's sister in Chelsea. What do you think of it?"

He had caught my eyes wandering to the biggest photograph pinned to the board. It was the blow-up Rowe had done of the Everard head.

"From that fuzzy old print it's amazing."

"I expect you're right. Charlie, why don't you try sitting on that bar stool over there. Yes, the one with the arms. Now, lift your head a bit and look out of the window. Head right a bit. What do you see? A flower bed, but what flowers? Geraniums. All right. Relax, but hold still."

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He had a double demy sheet of cartridge paper pinned to a board on the smaller easel. The easel was on castors. He wheeled it into a position somewhere behind my left shoulder and began to draw. He used charcoal at first, then crayon. Then there was a smell of turpentine and he began dabbing at the paper with a sponge. He caught me looking at him and told me to keep still. "Relax but keep still," he said. "I'll tell you when you can move. I'm working in pastel now but I'm using turps as well. You'll look like something by Degas."

It was a long time before he spoke again and the cramp in my neck was becoming really painful when there was a hammering at the door to the yard, the one I had come through, and the sound of a woman shouting.

Blag said, "You can rest for a bit, Charlie, but don't go away. Stay where you are."

He went to the door and opened it. The noise was coming from Auntie Alice and the golf club she was using as a hammer.

"What on earth are you doing, Alice?"

She pushed past him into the studio. "The car," she said. "That McGowan girl's taken the car. And on my club day. What right has she?"

"I told her to take it. It's a family car. Everyone uses it."

"The McGowans are not family."

"They're part of *my* family, Alice," he said, "whether you and Mother Autumn like it or not." He said it very distinctly.

"You're breaking her heart," Alice sobbed, and then burst into tears. The worst was over. With her grey shingled hair, her tweed skirt, and her golfing brogues, Alice wasn't dressed for grief, not the persuasive kind. Blag gave her his handkerchief to dry her eyes. "Jack'll drive you in the Morris," he said.

"But you'll come and talk to your mother tonight? Blag, you did promise."

"Oh yes, I promised. Off you go, Alice. Talk to Jack." He shut the door behind him and returned to the easel. "All right, Charlie," he said, "let's get back to work."

He worked another hour and then sent me off to lunch. He said that I could have a look at the picture the next day.

I was late for lunch and tired. Annette made me an omelette. After that I went up to my room meaning to read Maitland. Instead I fell asleep. When I woke up I had a bath and changed into my father's Savile Row tweed. Then I walked to the pub, not along the

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river path because I didn't want Mother Autumn to see me, but along the road. At the pub I met Rowe, who had used the road for the same reason as I had. I experimented with a gin and ginger ale.

We were late back for dinner, which was Annette's superb rabbit casserole with the white wine and basil sauce. All of us, including the Hunters, drank a lot of wine with it. After dinner they taught me to play nap. It was quite dark when the party broke up. To get some air I went for a walk along the riverbank. Then, when it began to drizzle with rain, I quickly walked back.

The studio lights were all on and spilling into the yard. Blag, I thought, would be waiting for Jenny to return home. I was at the top of the spiral staircase when I heard the shot. It was quite a loud bang. I went back down the stairs. As soon as I reached the door I recognised the fired cartridge smell. I called to him. "Are you there, Blag? Are you all right?" Then I went in.

He was lying on his back at the foot of the easel he had been using that morning and the blood was still pumping from the huge wounds in his chest and neck. The padded end of a mahlstick I had seen him use that morning was clutched in his right hand. In the few seconds I stood looking at that ghastly red bubbling mess my only thought was that the heart must still be beating. So I blundered out into the yard and ran for help.

It took me an age to get it. The Hunters were sound asleep and hard to wake. I knew that Rowe also had a telephone so tried shouting at him to call a doctor. The noise I made brought Jack downstairs with a raincoat over his pajamas. I did *not* say, "Blag's shot himself." I said, "Blag's been shot." Jack said, "Dear God Almighty," and ran to the studio door. As I followed him I was chattering about getting a doctor.

Minutes must have elapsed between my finding Blag wounded and reentering the studio with Jack. The second time was quite different. I could not stand where I had stood before. There was the family shotgun lying on the floor just where I had stood.

Jack was crouched over the mess on the floor. He glanced up at me sharply. "If you're going to puke, Charlie," he said, "you'd best do it outside. It's not the local doctor we'll be needing but the police surgeon."

Blag had thrown a cloth over the portrait on the easel. Now Jack pulled it off to cover the dead man's face. That left my face looking at me from the easel. As Jack had suggested I should, I went outside to be sick.

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I was still doing so when the light of the returning Crossley swept into the stable yard of Elm Park Farm. Jenny had returned. The bad dream entered its horror phase.

The coroner's inquest was at Isleworth near the hospital at which the autopsy had been performed. The courtroom was a territorial drill hall with not enough seating to accommodate the press. The place was packed.

The coroner was a local medical officer of health with some forensic qualifications. I was among the first to give evidence. I told the court about hearing the shot, about finding Blag wounded, and about running for help to the Hunters.

"That is Mr. Jack Hunter who called the police?"

"Yes, sir. There was nothing I could have done for those wounds, but Jack had been in the war."

"Thank you, Mr. Blagden. I'm sure you did all you could. You saw Mr. Cole that morning. How would you describe his state of mind?"

"Impatient, sir. He wanted no interruptions of his work or of his life."

That was the end of me. Jack Hunter came next. The star turn, however, was Dr. Lionel Benton-Black who had an address in Harley Street and who was consultant neurologist at a London teaching hospital. Blag Cole had been a patient of his for nearly twenty years.

"Suffering from what disease, Doctor?"

"I don't know for certain, sir, and now I never shall. His sister had died of Hereditary Progressive Chorea when he was referred to me. That is the disease of the central nervous system which is now generally known as Huntington's disease. The disease is hereditary and genetically transmitted through either parent or both. There is at present no blood or other body fluid test that can detect its presence. There are Huntington families—I know too many of them—and they are in a sense doomed. If the disease is there genetically, it can always strike, most commonly in the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth decades of a person's life. There are family histories of Huntington's going back ten generations. It has been described as the most vicious of hereditary diseases. Vicious is not a scientific term but I can understand its use in this context."

"When did you last see the deceased?"

"Three weeks ago. He said he had firm evidence to show that his father, the proved Huntington's carrier in that family, had not been his natural father. He claimed that he had been conceived illegitimately before his mother's marriage to Mr. Cole. He could not, he

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argued, be a Huntington's carrier. There was no reason, therefore, why he could not marry and beget children."

"Did you believe him, Doctor?"

"He had a good case, and photographs and other documents to support it. Probably all fantasy. With those who reach middle age it often happens. They have fantasies. Then they commit suicide. With men that is the most common outcome. I told Blagden Cole that on the subject of marriage he must use his own judgement."

The verdict, of course, was suicide, "while the balance of his mind was disturbed."

On the way out I felt a tap on my shoulder.

"Hello, young man." It was Mr. Bristow. "You look as if you could do with a beer."

I was glad to see him. I needed someone with whom to share my awful secret. When I told him about the shotgun that wasn't there when I found Blag but *was* there when I returned with Jack Hunter he nodded approvingly. "Not suicide, you think, but murder. What did the police think of the idea?"

"They were patient and kind. Naturally, when I found Blag with those terrible injuries I would be in a state of shock. It was quite understandable that I hadn't noticed the gun first time."

"And it was understandable."

"It was also understandable that Blag would hold the mahlstick by the wrong end. The police say that he used the stick to press the shotgun trigger and kill himself."

"And you don't think so?"

"I think that when he saw the gun pointing straight at him he grabbed the stick to try to deflect the gun barrel. He almost succeeded. The wounds were mainly on the right side."

He sipped his beer. "And who pointed the gun? Mother Autumn?"

"Blag went to see her that evening to confront her with that picture of Councillor Everard that you found for him and to announce his marriage. When he left she took the gun, which was kept with Alice's golf clubs, and followed him. She shot him. Then, still holding the gun, she walked back to her own house. On the way she met Alice, who had heard the shot. It was Alice who took the gun from her and left it on the studio floor for us to find."

"You'll never prove any of that, young man."

"I won't be trying, Mr. Bristow."

He had been fumbling in his briefcase. Now he pulled out a print of the Councillor Everard blow-up. "You may like this as a souve-

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nir," he said. "The case for Everard as Blag's natural father is about as sound as the verdict of suicide to which we have just listened. Everard married twice but had no children. His fault, probably. As a young man he had a commission in the yeomanry and in the year before Blag was born, attended an Officers Ball at Preston Barracks at which Miss Emma Blagden was also present. That is recorded in a local newspaper of the time. I say no more. Good luck with the law, young man. I have a train to catch at Euston."

When I got home I showed the photograph to my mother.

"That one never fathered Blag," she said. "Nothing like him. Wrong bones. The only good portrait I've ever seen of Blag was the one he did of his mother. I mean the nasty one he wrote on the back of, the one he said was of Ibsen's Mrs. Alving."

It was over twenty years before the subject of Blagden Cole came up again between us. In the mid-fifties a play of mine was opening in New York and she came over to see it. Of course, she had pieces of gossip.

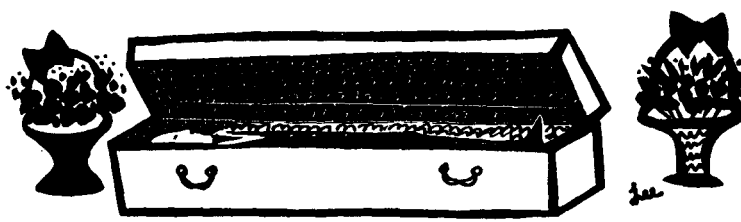
"Do you remember that girl Jenny, the one Blag Cole was going to marry? Well, after the suicide I kept in touch with her. Blag had got her pregnant, you know. Well, you wouldn't know. You were away."

"What happened?"

"She had a daughter. Nice child. Died in her twenties, poor thing."

"Huntington's?"

"Yes, I thought you'd be interested. My new doctor says they think now that in ten or twelve years' time they may be able to tell if someone's a carrier. Gene-mapping they call it. Yes, Jenny herself is all right. Children's book illustrating. I have to admit, though, I've always found her a teeny bit silly." She was silent for a moment and then sighed. "Of course one has to be fair. You thought that mother of his shot him, and perhaps you were right. But the one who really did for poor old Blag was the piano tuner."



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Meet Lois Hayn in her first prose piece for a national magazine.

CONTINUED REVELRY

by LOIS HAYN

I dreamt about the giraffes again last night. I am not complaining. They were fun to watch, galloping their slow, spindly-stiff way across a mist-smeared grassland. The important thing is that I could finally get to sleep. It must have been the sandwiches with the onion on rye this time. When I tried the same on white bread, it did not work, and I remained totally alert until three A.M. But those sliced onions on rye brought these lovely, speckled giraffes.

A year ago when I first began to suffer from insomnia, I naturally tried the old sheep-counting routine. What a mess. Some of the older sheep were really stubborn and refused to jump. Lowering the top rail made them turn up their noses even more. What really worried me was the way a few of the littler ones were getting crowded right up to the bar in front.

The Scandinavians advise taking hot grapefruit juice before retiring. The lulling arms of Morpheus continued to evade me; an acidy stomach did not. Then, too, these Northerners, living as they do so close to the Arctic Circle and enjoying sunny mornings, afternoons, and evenings, have the nerve, or perhaps the zest, to call their wakeful times "white nights." My own sleepless nights do not bloom a dazzling white; they are an anxiety of stretching gray, with the addition of pink-rimmed eyes when the alarm finally rings.

The method with the swimming pool worked beautifully at first. The trick is to pretend you are floating, drifting in this great blue swimming pool. I lay belly-down, concentrating until that luscious water bore me up. It was a wonderful sensation. I relaxed, easing along until my fingers and toes did not even seem to be part of me. Immediately before dropping off, I could really see the green cast of the bottom shimmering through that sheltered blue water. The next evening was even better. I imagined the edge of the pool where the precise mosaic of the tile would begin. Then I could see clearly the orange and green squares. The great full motion of the water bore me along until the alarm rang.

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At last, I had beaten insomnia. I even told my office mates about this terrific technique. One suggested doing some real swimming. But what did I need with an actual pool or even a confined hot tub when I had this great pool all in my mind?

The next night again found me dipping into those private, warmest of waters. Through the swell of blue, the tiles nodded their colored eyes at me. I wondered what made the water rock, for there came a pushing wave. I raised my head to see pine trees in a row.

I should have known right then and there that something was very wrong. The trees, if any, certainly should be palms, but here were these pines—smokey-black pines, midnight trees. But I slept, really slept well.

The following evening, I entered the water, indulged in lazy swimming, watched the mosaics glare up from the bottom, and raised my head for a second time. They were pines all right, black, stiff pines lined up like spears. A flash of a second before sleep wafted me onward, there was a woman standing out in front of those cold trees. Her mouth was stretched open, pulled wide as though she were calling someone. Then the greater seas of sleep washed over me.

Believe it or not, for a few months I was insomnia-free. Then, of course, the rhythm of my "white nights" returned. I should more accurately now call them "blue nights," because I dove again into the familiar, mental water. Those tiles were the same with the clean, transparent aqua lapping at them, and those trees in their row were still as tall and as hard and as gloomy. The woman also appeared, her black hair slicked straight back from her forehead. I could see the suggestion of bow ends, pieces of red sticking out behind her black hair. Her mouth remained open. She continued calling out. She was wearing lipstick—a very shiny, dark shade. But she was not calling. She was crying, no, she was screaming! Her chin was down and she was screaming! I fell asleep anyway; it was only a mini-nightmare.

The next nightfall it seemed the pool sequence had stretched, opening out in my mind from the time when I was fully awake in bed until I was deeply asleep. She was there again, as intent as before, the woman standing by the blue water. Screaming again, pulling open that oval of a mouth. Definitely a scream. For she had started to raise her arms, to jerk her hands up to her face. Then the scene must have changed, been dissolved by the water.

But that pool, my pool, came for me every night. It was the same water. I could smell the old, bitter chlorine. The deep was all around

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me, moving. The woman was there. She was taller, closer somehow, and her arms, her hands, reached nearer up to her face. Also, there was someone else. I did not truly see the figure at first. I only knew it was present, sort of an accompaniment to the woman's scream.

The pool always waited for me. The scene gradually cleared, refocussed. I finally made out the other person standing to the left. It was a man, a man dressed in a business suit. He knew the woman, of that I am sure. Knew her personally, for a long time. He had—no, I could not grasp it. The alarm rang.

The pool came back to me, yes, it came rushing to me each night like a tide the moment my eyes were closed. The incessant players returned as though they had simply been stayed, locked in all day behind my eyeballs, waiting for me to unfreeze them.

He was strong, the man. And he was holding his right arm out so stiffly. What was that? An exact line of sight all the way down his arm to a—gun?

I wanted to help the woman. Yes, that was it. I must help the crying, calling woman. She was so attractive, so nice, calling out right to me, directly at me, those bow ends still tipped up behind her head. The man was still energized, pointing the gray metal of his gun. The cold tableau repeated exactly.

Even the sky was cold now. Strange that there should be such a frigid sky with the water lapping so warm and thick, almost gelatinous. Odd, isn't it, that the sky can be viewed when I am floating face-downward, turned on my stomach? It was not a quiet floating, but a moving, skimming, rolling float.

The man still held his gun. He did not fire. No, no! He had already fired! The man had aimed, fired, completed his motion. That was why the woman was screaming. The woman was a powerful, full-out screamer. The man's shoulder was still hunched. He was looking toward me, definitely, he was staring at me. He knew me. He knew all about me. I rocked in the water. I could not feel my feet. I tried to yell and merely gurgled.

Then the woman closed her mouth and the man looked away as if it were all over. He took a step. The trees rustled and filled my ears along with more surges of water.

The alarm went off sure as a cannon. I was up, shaking, cold.

An onion sandwich would be fine from now on. An onion sandwich might save me. Perhaps I'll dream about those speckled giraffes again. If I can get them to run fast enough, far enough, maybe I can reach the desert. ●

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The swindler or "grifter" is usually a wanderer, a con man who is always on the move looking for new prey in towns where his face is unknown. He's the sort of crook you might meet, as Bill Pronzini imagines it here, in a large convention hotel. . . .

SHADE WORK

by BILL PRONZINI

Johnny Shade blew into San Francisco on the first day of summer. He went there every year, when he had the finances; it was a good place to find action on account of the heavy convention business. Usually he went a little later in the summer, around mid-July, when there were fifteen or twenty thousand conventioneers wandering around, a high percentage of them with money in their pockets and a willingness to lay some of it down on a poker table. You could take your time then, weed out the deadheads and the short-money scratchers. Pick your vic.

But this year was different. This year he couldn't afford to wait around or take his time. He had three thousand in his kick that he'd scored in Denver, and he needed to parlay that into ten grand—fast. Ten grand would buy him into a big con Elk Tracy and some other boys were setting up in Louisville. A classic big-store con, even more elaborate than the one Newman and Redford had pulled off in *The Sting,* Johnny's favorite flick. Elk needed a string of twenty and a nut of two hundred thousand to set it up right; that was the reason for the ten-grand buy-in. The guaranteed net was two million. Ten grand buys you a hundred, minimum. Johnny Shade had been a card mechanic and cheat for nearly two decades and he'd never held that much cash in his hands at one time. Not even close to that much.

He was a small-time grifter and he knew it. A single-o, traveling around the country on his own because he preferred it that way, looking for action wherever he could find it. But it was never heavy action, never the big score. Stud and draw games in hotel rooms with marks who never seemed to want to lose more than a few

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hundred at a sitting. He wasn't a good enough mechanic to play in even a medium-stakes game and hope to get away with crimps or hops or overhand runups or Greek-deals or hand-mucks or any of the other shuffling or dealing cheats. He just didn't have the fingers for it. So mostly he relied on his specialty, shade work, which was how he'd come to be called Johnny Shade. He even signed hotel registers as Johnny Shade nowadays, instead of the name he'd been born with. A kind of private joke.

Shade work was fine in small games. Most amateurs never thought to examine or riffle-test a deck when he ran a fresh one in, because it was always in its cellophane wrapper with the manufacturer's seal unbroken. The few who did check the cards didn't spot the gaff on account of they were looking for blisters, shaved edges, blockout or cutout work—the most common methods of marking a deck. They didn't know about the more sophisticated methods like flash or shade work. In Johnny's case, they probably wouldn't have spotted the shade gaff if they had known, not the way he did it.

He had it down to a science. He diluted blue and red aniline dye with alcohol until he had the lightest possible tint, then used a camel's hair brush to wash over a small section of the back pattern of each card in a Bee or Bicycle deck. The dye wouldn't show on the red or blue portion of the card back, but it tinted the white part just lightly enough so you could see it if you knew what to look for. And he had eyesight almost as good as Clark Kent's. He could spot his shade work on a vic's cards across the table in poor light without even squinting.

But the high-rollers knew about shade work, just as they knew about every other scam a professional hustler could come up with. You couldn't fool them, so you couldn't steal their money. If you were Johnny Shade, you had to content yourself with low-rollers and deadheads, with pocket and traveling cash instead of the big score.

He was tired of the game, that was the thing. He'd been at it too long, lived on the far edge of riches too long, been a single-o grifter too long. He wanted a slice of the good life. Ten grand buys a hundred. With a hundred thousand he could travel first-class, wine and dine and bed first-class women, take his time finding new action—maybe even set up a big con of his own. Or find a partner and work some of the fancier short cons. Lots of options, as long as a guy had real money in his kick.

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First, though, he had to parlay his Denver three K into ten K. Then he could hop a plane for Louisville and look up Elk Tracy. Ten days . . . that was all the time he had before Elk closed out his string. Ten days to pick the right vics, set up two or three or however many games it took him to net the seven thousand.

He found his first set of marks his first night in Frisco. That was a good omen. His luck was going to change; he could feel it.

Most weeks in the summer there was a convention going on at the Hotel Nob Hill, off Union Square. He walked in there on this night, and the first thing he saw was a banner that said WELCOME FIDDLERS in great big letters. Hick musicians, or maybe some kind of organization for people who were into cornball music. Just his type of crowd. Just his type of mark.

He hung out in the bar, nursing a beer, circulating, keeping his ears open. There were certain words he listened for and "poker" was one of them. One of four guys in a booth used it, and when he sidled closer he saw that they were all wearing badges with FIDDLER *on them and their names and the cities they were from written* underneath. They were talking the right talk: stud poker, bragging about how good they were at it, getting ready for a game. Ripe meat. All he had to do was finagle his way among them, get himself invited to join the play if the set-up and the stakes were right.

He was good at finagling. He had the gift of gab, and a face like a Baptist preacher's, and a winning smile. First he sat himself down at a table near their booth. Then he contrived to jostle a waitress and spill a fresh round of beers she was bringing to them. He offered to pay for the drinks, flashed his wallet so they could see that he was flush. Chatted them up a little, taking it slow, feeling his way.

One of the fiddlers bought him a beer, then he bought them all another round. That got him the invitation to join them. Right away he laid on the oil about being in town for a convention himself, the old birds of a feather routine. They shook hands all around. Dave from Cleveland, Mitch from Los Angeles, Verne from Cedar Rapids, Harry from Bayonne. And Johnny from Denver. He didn't even have to maneuver the talk back to cards. They weren't interested in his convention or their own, or San Francisco, or any other kind of small talk; they were interested in poker. He played some himself, he said. Nothing he liked better than five-stud or draw. No wild-card games, none of that crap; he was a purist. So were they.

"We're thinking about getting up a game," Harry from Bayonne said. "You feel like sitting in, Johnny?"

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"I guess I wouldn't mind," he said. "Depending on the stakes. Nothing too rich for my blood." He showed them his best smile. "Then again, nothing too small, either. Poker's no good unless you make it interesting, right?"

If they'd insisted on penny-ante or buck-limit, he'd have backed out and gone looking elsewhere. But they were sports: table stakes, ten-buck limit per bet, no limit on raises. They looked like they could afford that kind of action. Fiddle-music jerks, maybe, but well-dressed and reasonably well-heeled. He caught a glimpse of a full wallet when Mitch from L.A. bought another round. Might be as much as four or five grand among the four of them.

Verne from Cedar Rapids said he had a deck of cards in his room; they could play there. Johnny said, "Sounds good. How about if we go buy a couple more decks in the gift shop. Nothing like the feel of a new deck after a while."

They all thought that was a good idea. Everybody drank up and they went together to the gift shop. All Johnny had to do was make sure the cards they bought were Bicycle, one of the two most common brands; he had four shaded Bicycle decks in his pocket, two blue-backs and two red-backs. Then they all rode upstairs to Verne from Cedar Rapids's room and shed their coats and jackets and got down to business.

Johnny played it straight for a while, card-counting, making conservative bets, getting a feel for the way the four marks played. Only one of them was reckless: Mitch from L.A., the one with the fattest wallet. He'd have liked two or three of that type, but one was better than none. One was all he needed.

After an hour and a half he was ahead about a hundred and Mitch from L.A. was the big winner, betting hard, bluffing at least part of the time. Better and better. Time to bring in one of his shaded decks. That was easy, too. They'd let him hold the decks they'd bought downstairs; simple for him to bring out one of his own instead.

He didn't open it himself. You always let one of the marks do that, so the mark could look it over and see that it was still sealed in cellophane with the manufacturer's stamp on top intact. The stamp was the main thing to the mark, the one thing you never touched when you were fixing a deck. What they didn't figure on was what you'd done: You carefully opened the cellophane wrapper along the bottom and slid out the card box. Then you opened the box along one side, prying the glued flaps apart with a razor blade. Once you'd shaded the cards, you resealed the box with rubber cement, slipped

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it back into the cellophane sleeve, refolded the sleeve ends along the original creases, and resealed them with a drop of glue. When you did the job right—and Johnny Shade was a master—nobody could tell that the package had been tampered with. Sure as hell not a fiddler named Dave from Cleveland, the one who opened the gimmicked deck.

The light was pretty good in there; Johnny could read his shade work with no more than a casual glance at the hands as they were dealt out. He took a couple of medium-sized pots, worked his winnings up to around five hundred, biding his time until both he and Mitch from L.A. drew big hands on the same deal. It finally happened about 10:30, on a hand of jacks-or-better. Harry from Bayonne was dealing; Johnny was on his left. Mitch from L.A. drew a pat full house, aces over fives. Johnny scored trip deuces. When he glanced over at the rest of the deck, he saw that the top card—his card on the draw—was the fourth deuce. Beautiful. A set-up like this was always better when you weren't the dealer, didn't have to deal seconds or anything like that to win the pot. Just read the shade and it was yours.

Mitch from L.A. bet ten and Johnny raised him and Mitch raised back. Verne from Cedar Rapids stayed while the other two dropped, which made Johnny smile inside. Verne owned four high spades in sequence and was gambling on a one-card draw to fill a royal or a straight flush. But there was no way he was going to get it because Mitch had his spade ace and Johnny had his spade nine. The best he could do was a loser flush. Johnny raised again, and Mitch raised back, and Verne hung in stubborn. There was nearly a grand in the pot when Mitch finally called.

Johnny took just the one card on the draw, to make the others think he was betting two pair. Mitch would think that even if Johnny caught a full house, his would be higher because he had aces up; so Mitch would bet hot and heavy. Which he did. Verne from Cedar Rapids had caught his spade flush and hung in there for a while, driving the pot even higher, until he finally realized his flush wasn't going to beat what Johnny and Mitch were betting; then he dropped. Mitch kept right on working his full boat, raising each time Johnny raised, until he was forced to call when his cash pile ran down to a lone tenspot. That last ten lifted the total in the pot to twenty-two hundred bucks.

Johnny grinned and said, "Read 'em and weep, gentlemen," and fanned out his four deuces face up. Mitch from L.A. didn't say a

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word; he just dropped his cards and looked around at the others. None of them had anything to say, either. Johnny grinned again and said, "My lucky night," and reached for the pot.

Reaching for it was as far as he got.

Harry from Bayonne closed a big paw over his right wrist; Dave from Cleveland did the same with his left wrist. They held him like that, his hands imprisoned flat on the table.

"What the hell's the idea?" Johnny said.

Nobody answered him. Mitch from L.A. swept the cards together and then began to examine them one at a time, holding each card up close to his eyes.

Harry from Bayonne said, "What is it, shade work?"

"Right. Real professional job."

"Thought so. I'm pretty good at spotting blockout and cutout work. And I didn't feel any blisters or edge or sand work."

"At first I figured he might be one of the white-on-white boys," Verne from Cedar Rapids said. "You know, used whiteout fluid on the white borders. Then I tumbled to the shading."

"Nice resealing on that card box, Johnny," Dave from Cleveland said. "If I hadn't known it was a gimmicked deck, I wouldn't have spotted it."

Johnny gawped. "You knew?" he said. "You all *knew?*"

"Oh sure," Mitch from L.A. said. "As soon as you moved in on us down in the bar."

"But—but—why did you. . . ?"

"We wanted to see what kind of hustler you were, how you worked your scam. You might call it professional curiosity."

"Christ. Who are you guys?"

They told him. And Johnny Shade groaned and put his head in his hands. He knew then that his luck had changed, all right—all for the bad. That he was never going to make the big score, in Louisville or anywhere else. That he might not even be much good as a small-time grifter any more. Once word of this got out, he'd be a laughingstock from coast to coast. And word *would* get out. These four would see to that.

They didn't belong to some hick music group. They weren't fiddlers; they were FIDDLERs, part of a newly formed nationwide professional organization. Fraud Identification Detectives, Domestic Law Enforcement Ranks.

Vice cops. He'd tried to run a gambling scam at a convention of vice cops . . .

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Domestic settings for crime are always used to great advantage by Celia Fremlin. Here she finds an unusual slant on the subject of domestic violence . . .

PROVOCATION

by CELIA FREMLIN

Have you ever wondered what it feels like to be the husband of a battered wife? Having endured ten years or so as just such a husband, I think I am in a position to tell you about it. I'll try, anyway.

Here goes.

Actually, this is a very good time for me to be indulging in a bit of self-analysis, because Lorna has once again had a spell in hospital—this time with a cracked collarbone and a couple of broken ribs. Once again, she didn't tell on me. I knew she wouldn't; she never does. She told them some yarn about falling down our front steps while carrying a load of bottles for the bottle bank.

And they believed her—or pretended to, anyway. Whether injuries caused by a couple of violent blows from an old-fashioned frying pan are really compatible with the injuries you might get from falling down a flight of stone steps, we'll never know. The medicos don't want this sort of hassle any more than I do. Why should they? The injuries were straightforward enough, calling for straightforward treatment. They're medicos, dammit, not policemen: they were able to do their job efficiently and with complete success without asking any questions at all.

Yes, I must hand it to them: they did a fine job, and Lorna arrived back home yesterday as good as new; and apart from me asking solicitously how she felt, and her answering that she felt fine, thank you, just fine, we never mentioned the incident at all. We never do. It's better that way.

At least, I think it is. It's only just lately that I've begun to wonder about this, and to feel twinges—not of guilt, which I'm sure is what you're expecting—but of fear. A fear which seems to grow bigger

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and darker every time I look at it. It's even begun to invade my dreams. Last night I woke up screaming, and Lorna had to reach across and comfort me, as well as she could with that stiff bandage sort of thing around her neck and shoulder. She's got to keep it on for at least another two weeks, I'm told.

So what is it that I'm afraid of? I've asked myself this several times lately, and I still haven't come up with any plausible answer. I need to do some hard thinking, and right now would seem to be a good time, with everything so quiet, and me lying here alone in the big bed waiting for it to be time to get up.

First, let's get the facts straight. On the face of it, they are fairly reassuring. I can't see any realistic prospect of getting myself into trouble, because no one knows anything, apart from us two. Lorna will never give me away, I know she won't. She loves me. She tells me so, earnestly, after each of these unlucky episodes, and she helps me to pretend it hasn't happened. In case you didn't know, this is an important part of the battering syndrome. Pretending it hasn't happened is a vital stage in the recovery process; it's like the period of convalescence after a serious illness. We both need this brief respite from the truth, to recover our equilibrium.

Well, doesn't everyone? Need a brief respite from the truth now and again, in order to recover his or her equilibrium?

His or her. As I've told you, this urgent need to bypass the truth applies to Lorna just as much as to myself. I'm sure it does. Well, let's look at her side of it. She married a man with a hot temper—she knew this at the time, she must have done—and what she should have been doing all these years, what a truly wise and loving wife would have been doing, would be to have worked out ways of not provoking this temper of mine; and this she has signally failed to do.

Oh, she's tried. I've watched her trying; and sometimes I think it's this very trying which rouses the black devil in me and breaks down my self-control.

"Yes, dear," she says, when I know perfectly well that she's thinking "No!"; and "Very well, darling, of course I won't go if you'd rather I didn't"; and "I'm sorry, dear, I do see it was all my fault"—when even *I* know that it wasn't.

Oh, a million things. Whatever I want, however trivial, she gives in to it at once. Anything I say, she agrees with it before I've even finished the sentence.

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She will never quarrel with me. Never, about anything. Doesn't she realise I'm a man who *needs* quarrels, as another man needs food and drink? Her absolute refusal to quarrel—ever, about anything—leaves a yawning gap in our marriage which nothing can fill, and which to a man like me is frustrating beyond words. And because I know no words to describe the feeling, I describe it with my fists; or, occasionally, with the first implement that comes to hand.

And even that doesn't rouse her to protest! She doesn't cry, she doesn't retaliate. She just hides her bruises from the neighbours and tells me she still loves me. It's enough, sometimes, to drive a man to murder.

No, it's all right. That was just a manner of speaking—I'm not really planning to kill Lorna. On the contrary, you could say that the boot is on the other foot; and this is where my thoughts start on their long dark spiral, down, down into the very core of my terror.

My terror. It's not fair, is it? Lorna is the one who should be terrified: instead of which, she tells me she still loves me. It's creepy.

And it's now, at this point in my meditations, that I hear the paperboy pushing through our front gate. I hear the paper, heavy with weekend supplements, thumping onto the mat, and in that moment I know—I know in every pulsing organ of my body—exactly what it is that makes me so afraid.

It's that newspaper. Well, not that one in particular, it's all of them; and the TV and the radio too. Haven't you noticed, lately, how they've all been on about battered wives turning on their husbands and murdering them? And half the time getting away with it because of being battered? Murdering them in horrible ways, too: did you read about the woman who poured boiling water over her husband as he lay asleep in bed? And the one who kept a long, sharp pair of dressmaking scissors under her pillow all night and every night, so that they'd be ready when she judged that the moment had come? I told you, didn't I, that I had an awful dream last night? Well, I dreamed that I'd lifted up Lorna's pillow and found under it those scissors, sharp as a beak, and large as a pair of garden shears. And when I woke screaming, and Lorna turned around to comfort me, I couldn't wait for it to be morning and for her to be gone so that I could look under the real pillow and check if there was a real pair of scissors there.

There wasn't, of course. But what else might there be, even more ghastly, secreted somewhere in the house, awaiting its opportunity?

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Something totally unforeseeable, exquisitely horrible, the way these women do it, their fiendish, scheming minds worming into every crack and cranny of the domestic routine, assessing the potential of this weapon or that, and setting it up to deliver some hideous revenge.

Never again will I be able to get into bed without first looking for scissors under Lorna's pillow. Never again will I be able to see a pan of water heating up on the cooker without wondering what it is being heated up for? Probably, it's just to boil the potatoes for dinner, but on the other hand . . .

And you do realise, don't you, that my case is even more desperate than that of these other unlucky husbands. Any psychiatrist will tell you that suppressed anger is the most dangerous anger of all. After all these years of soft-answering me, of forcing a smile on her face, what a cauldron of rage Lorna must have seething inside her, ready to explode in some act of revenge too ghastly to imagine.

And with all this, she says she loves me! "Perfect love casteth out fear," they say. What sort of love is it, then, that *creates* fear? Fear like this, which is eating away my very vitals. . . ?

In the midst of these reflections, I must have dozed off for a minute, because I didn't hear Lorna coming into the room. I roused myself only in time to see her setting a cup of tea on my bedside table—a delicious, strong, piping-hot cup of tea, exactly as I like it. It must have been quite a job, making it and carrying it upstairs with that wonky shoulder of hers. I looked at it longingly. How tempting it was! But of course it was poisoned, with some hideously painful type of poison. I'd have to get up and tip it down the loo as soon as she'd left the room.

But she didn't leave the room, not immediately. She sort of hung about, looking at me, till I felt quite uncomfortable. Just for something to say, to fill the awkward moment, I asked her to draw the curtains and let in a bit of light.

"I won't!" she said. "I'm sick of this carrying on! Draw them yourself!"—and she slammed out of the room, banging the door behind her so that the whole house shook.

And our whole life, too? I don't know; it felt like that, just for the moment. All I know is, I didn't tip the tea down the loo, I drank it all, and it was delicious.

Oh, and I didn't bother to get out of bed and draw the curtains, either. There was no need. The whole room seemed in that moment to be suffused with light. ●

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David Delman belongs to the ranks of those who wear many hats in the mystery genre. In addition to being a prolific novelist and short story writer, he is a mystery book reviewer for the Philadelphia Enquirer. *Although he has been writing fiction since the outset of his career, his bread and butter has come mainly from other jobs: newspaper reporter, lingerie salesman, and later, advertising executive. . . .*

THE INTERROGATION

by DAVID DELMAN

She took the chair I offered, took it over actually, enhancing it the way only a graceful woman can, the way I'd never seen anyone else appropriate that particular beat-up piece of furniture. I watched her. She watched me doing that. She knew I was impressed with her, and that of course complicated the hell out of everything.

As if things weren't already complicated enough.

Beginning with the corpus delicti itself. A cop, a senior cop, an inspector, for God's sake, of which there are never more than forty in the whole NYPD.

A week earlier Joe Ricci had called me into his office and before I could say, "Nice day, Cap," he'd handed me this slip of paper with a name and an address on it, both instantly recognizable to anyone in the precinct, since we'd spent twenty-four hours jawing about practically nothing else.

"Delamere's out, you're in," he said. And while my mouth dropped open idiotically he added, "Period, the end." But then he pointed his finger ceilingward. "You were tapped."

"How come?"

"You knew the deceased, didn't you?"

"I spoke to him maybe twice in my life. Okay, so I know the *widow's* family—slightly. My old man and hers were rookie cops together, but I haven't seen either of the Gillespie sisters in close to fifteen years."

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He pointed ceilingward again. "Maybe somebody up there likes you."

"Or doesn't," I said sourly.

Captain Ricci's been my boss since I transferred over to homicide three years ago. It was at least partly due to him that I made lieutenant as fast as I did, so I owe him. Also, I know how good a guy he is when they let him be. And, yeah, I know that sometimes the dice roll what they roll, and snake eyes or seven you play what shows or bust out of the game.

I saw a flash of sympathy in his eyes. "If I were you I'd clean it up fast."

"It? If you don't mind me asking, Captain, what the hell *is* it?"

"Whatever it is. Now take off."

But at the door he stopped me. "Danny . . ."

"Yeah?"

"Lefty Lew Cameron was a goddamn legend in this department. For my money he was the best cop ever. The toughest, the smartest, the squarest, *the* best. You understand me?"

Well, not with *crystal* clarity. For instance, there was a minority view. Some said the inspector had his dark side. An uncertain temper, some said, to put it mildly. I decided to keep that corrective unstated, however. The look in Ricci's eyes and the set to his jaw suggested it might be wisdom.

Anyway, I told myself, the higher echelons of the NYPD had a history of moving in mysterious ways, and where was it written that lowly looies were *supposed* to understand? So I nodded, even saluted—to demonstrate perfect accord—and took that slightly empty feeling in the pit of my stomach over to the desk of Sergeant Ernie Bledsoe, who was good at listening whenever I bitched and moaned. After which, as was his high-noon habit, he went out and got thick, juicy, drippy, restorative Hymie's Deli specials for our lunch.

And so now here was Katherine Anne Gillespie decorating the hell out of my working-class chair.

It was our fourth meeting since that day I had got so lucky in Captain Ricci's office. But it was the first meeting for her on unfriendly ground. Not coincidentally, it was also the first meeting since I'd finally figured out who had done what to Inspector Cameron.

Now all I had to do was get Katherine Anne to stop lying about that. Ha!

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Katherine Anne—in case you lost track—was the widow's sister. At thirty-five, she was five years older than Sherry Cameron but didn't look it. Probably it was the bright red hair (worn short, elegantly cropped across her cheekbones) and vivid blue eyes, age-reducing colors. Or maybe it was the way she held herself, stick-straight, like a cop's daughter's supposed to. She was tall and thin, boyish but not mannish—a tennis player, I knew from the detailed case notes Ernie Bledsoe had put together for me. Divorced, no kids. She had one of those laughing mouths, extra wide, and a long nose with a bump in it. Not conventionally pretty, but in a certain light—in certain moods maybe—beautiful. Anyway she was a woman men watched. Even leathery old Bledsoe, fifty, tired-eyed, as impressionable as a statue, seemed to twitch a little when she went by his desk.

She said good morning to me, I said it back at her, and thanked her for coming down on such short notice.

She smiled. "Did I have much choice? I didn't want to be hauled into a paddy wagon with all Madison Avenue looking on bug-eyed. Think of my professional standing."

Downplayed, it was still a pretty hefty professional standing: senior vice president and creative director of a major international advertising agency.

"I wouldn't have done that to you, Miss Gillespie."

"No?"

"No, ma'am. You're a lady with friends in high places."

"Wrong. And if I were, I'd warn them off. Because I know you better than you think I do. And your dad called me Kitty."

We were silent a moment, studying each other. She wore a dark green sweater and beige tweed skirt. The sweater was not particularly tight nor the skirt noticeably short, but there was no doubt about shapeliness involved. She crossed her legs and caught me looking. "Sorry," she said. She said it nicely, like someone not wanting to take unfair advantage, and rearranged her skirt circumspectly.

"Better than I think you do?"

"Oh, come on. Your dad used to brag on you all the time—to my dad. Danny Rubin this, Danny Rubin that. We never saw him without a clipping in his hand. Danny Rubin, scholar jock. And then of course Sherry had this mad crush on you. Tell me that's news to you."

I didn't tell her anything.

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"So there used to be considerable Dan Rubin character analysis going on in my house. Plus a lot of giggling. And I've kept up, too. I mean I know you've been divorced—three years, like me. That you have no kids. And that you're sort of a loner, they say."

"Do they?"

"And sort of a tomcat, too. But I always think the first goes along with the second. They don't sound as if they do, I know, but it seems to me they're connected." She looked at me. "By emptiness."

She smiled at me in an odd way, as if certain I knew what she meant. And I did, more or less. At least about emptiness and how it could get mixed up with bitterness and cause you to do things you didn't much like yourself for.

"Anyway, Sherry did have this enormous crush on you. She was . . . what, about thirteen then? The perfect crush age. She got your autograph once, when Duke came to the Garden for some basketball tournament. But I don't suppose you remember that either."

"No."

"A pity."

"Why?"

Her hands were clasped loosely in her lap. Now she lifted one to study nails that seemed to have become a disappointment. After which she said something enigmatic: "Poor Sherry. Men have always been such bastards to her."

"Listen," I said, "I've got nothing against your sister, and if I knew where she is I'd tell her so. Why don't you give me a hint?"

"For the umpteenth time, I haven't the least idea where she is. Why is that so difficult for you to accept? She called a week ago to say she's all right but that she needs some grieving time. And that when she feels reasonably together again she'll let us *all* know where she is. Now what is it *I* can do for you . . ." She paused for emphasis. ". . . Daniel?"

"I'd like you to tell me what happened that Sunday evening."

She sat up sharply. "That's why you got me down here? You can't be serious. We've been over and over that. Why are you making this so complicated? My brother-in-law had cancer. It was killing him slowly. He speeded up the process, that's all. Why can't you let it go at that?"

"A suicide."

"Yes. Of course."

"A suicide with no note."

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"That never happens? He . . . it was an impulse. He just . . . are you telling me now the official view is homicide?"

"There is no official view yet, Miss Gillespie. But the case belongs to me until someone takes it away. And until someone does I've decided to treat it as a homicide investigation."

"Why?"

I shrugged. "It seems to me efficient."

She crossed her legs again, self-consciously enough to turn a simple physical act into something sexually overloaded. She blushed; I toyed with a pencil until it got away from me, landing a foot or so from her chair. She started in pursuit.

"Leave it," I said.

She obeyed. "I didn't mean to irritate you," she said.

"You didn't."

"Then for heaven's sake call me Kitty. Or at least Kate. People who insist on calling me Miss Gillespie do it because they know it makes me nervous. *Please* call me Kate. I promise not to let it go to my head."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

Her eyes met mine. For a moment it was as if our glances were stuck permanently, as if breaking them apart, or even blinking, would qualify me for some kind of Olympic event.

I managed to get up, to cross the room and stare out the window as if the scarred sidewalk and the fire-gutted shoe factory I saw there were new to the South Bronx landscape. When I turned back her eyes were on her clasped hands again, which once more rested primly in her lap. "It's just so nutty," she said softly.

"What is?"

"It's just such an odd position to be in. On the one hand we're dealing with . . . well, life and death doesn't overstate it, does it? On the other there's all this . . . mating game stuff."

"I don't follow."

"Oh, of course you do. It's clear we're attracted to each other. It started that first day, that day you came stomping into Sherry's house looking sore as a bear at having to be there. You absolutely hated being there."

I kept silent.

"Well, you did."

"What I hated was being jerked around."

She sighed. "All right, I did pull a string. My last remaining string, as it happens. What it got me was you, plus a promise to

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keep Lewis's friends from forming a lynch mob. Nothing else."

"What else were you hoping for?"

"What else? An end to this picking at sores, of course. Lewis is dead. All the king's horses . . ." She shrugged and broke off.

"Why me?"

"Isn't that obvious? I was desperate for a friend at court."

"A friend? What I am is a cop. With a job to do."

"I know, I know. I understand that. If I didn't at first I certainly do now. But there's the rub, don't you see? The fact is we please each other. I know that's awkward, but there it is. We've made a connection. Now that doesn't happen to me often. Does it to you?"

The answer was no. The answer I gave her, however, had to do with the game going on between us, our contest. The rules kept shifting, and maybe the objective wasn't always as clear as it should be, but it was a contest, all right. Fully engaged. That much I was sure of. That much, plus one other thing: she was as sure of it as I was.

"You're still trying to pull strings," I said. "You think you see a couple attached to me."

Dark red appeared over her cheekbones again, and when she spoke her voice shook a little. "I wonder if you really believe that."

My fist came down on my desk hard enough to surprise us both. "I don't know what I believe. About you, I mean. And anyway that's not important. What's important here and now is what I believe about your sister. So why don't we stop horsing around and get back to business."

She straightened. Her chin lifted, her mouth narrowed, and her face chilled to a map of enemy territory.

"That's why I'm here, isn't it? And by getting back to business you mean the rigamarole involved in grilling and regrilling me in the hope that I'll fall into some kind of trap."

"In a homicide investigation," I said patiently, making a point of how patient I was being, "those interrogated always complain about having to go over and over the same ground. But if I take you back often enough maybe you'll come on something you forgot. Or see something a little differently. Or maybe I'll hear it a little differently. Anyway it's not the useless exercise you seem to think it is."

"Useless isn't the word I had in mind." She smiled brilliantly. "Try underhanded."

I didn't smile at all.

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Her smile faded and she said, "We had an early dinner, then Lewis went into his study. He hadn't been feeling well. He told us he'd rather be by himself for a while. The *we* at dinner were my sister Sherry Cameron, her husband Lewis Cameron, and me, Katherine Anne Gillespie. I was spending the weekend there, which is what I've been doing once a month for the past year ever since Lewis got sick, in order to help out. Have I forgotten anything? Oh yes, Mrs. Mackie was the only other person on the premises. Mrs. Eleanor Mackie, cook, housekeeper, old family retainer. She was Lewis's nurse when he was a child. Nanny, she calls it, being English. Did you have a nanny, Lieutenant Rubin?"

"Who discovered the body?"

"Who discovered the body? My lands, there's a spanking new question. I did."

"How and when?"

Her eyebrows lifted. "Is this it—the moment of the trap? You've got something truly diabolical up your sleeve? Well, I'm not surprised. I keep hearing how clever you are. And ambitious. How and when? Wouldn't when and how be better, Lieutenant? More *efficient?* Monday morning, shortly after six. I wanted to get an early start back to the city, give myself a chance to beat the gridlock. I went into the study—"

"Why?"

"Why into the study?"

"Yes. Why the detour if you were in a hurry?"

"I thought I might have left my purse there the previous evening. As it happens, I hadn't. I found it later on the catchall table in the hall." Her expression tightened—the wince caused by a stab of memory. For some reason that made me notice an unobtrusive spray of freckles on the bridge of her nose. "What I found in the study was Lewis." She shut her eyes but opened them again at once to meet my glance directly. "There was quite a lot of blood," she said evenly.

"Which hand held the gun?"

"His left, of course. Lewis was a famous southpaw. You know that. Lefty Lew Cameron you all called him when he pitched in the city softball league." She paused to throw me one of those looks that would have had me rolling around with a third-degree job if scorn could actually burn.

"Was that the trap? Come on now, Lieutenant, that's downright banal. Where are the bells and whistles, the panache? My dear sir,

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after coming down here in the midst of a very busy day I have the right to a better show than that."

"Medical examiner says Inspector Cameron died at around eleven P.M. Sunday night. But none of you heard the shot because—" I lifted Bledsoe's notes and found the salient quote. "—'Mrs. Mackie is hard of hearing. Sherry had taken a pill, and I am a notorious sound sleeper.' The 'I' meaning you, right?"

"Yes."

I nodded. "But Mrs. Mackie isn't so deaf she didn't hear the Camerons quarreling."

"There was no quarrel that evening, Lieutenant."

"No?"

"None."

"Well, I didn't *say* that evening, did I? I said quarreling. By which I meant general quarreling. On a lot of evenings."

"As his illness took hold Lewis changed, if that's what you're driving at. Understandable, isn't it? Certainly it's not uncommon. He became resentful, easily annoyed."

"Abusive?"

She took a moment with that. We were up a notch now, and she knew there were ways she could make a mistake. Blue gray eyes wary. Hell, steely. I got a sense of how she might be in a boardroom.

"Did Mrs. Mackie tell you that? What did you do, thumbscrew the poor lady?"

I folded my arms across my chest and waited.

"He did tend to say things to her at times, things he shouldn't have, but we all understood that—"

"I'm not talking about saying. I'm talking about smacking around. He sent her to the hospital once."

"It was an accident. She fell."

"He hit her, so she fell."

"Yes, damn it, he hit her, she fell, took six stitches in her chin, and then came back as loving as ever. As nurturing as ever. You can twist and turn with that as much as you like, but what you're left with is a brave woman, a selfless woman, determined to do the job she signed on to do."

"That what I'm left with?"

"Yes. Which is precisely what Mrs. Mackie will swear to if she should ever be called upon. Do you understand me, Lieutenant?"

"After you talk to her, you mean."

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She looked at her watch. "I have this meeting. A client is coming in from Boston, and much as I'd like to stay around and play pattycake with you, or whatever game this is, I *am* running out of time."

I reached for Bledsoe's notes and quoted again: " 'My sister Sherry hates guns with a passion and would never willingly touch one. Ever since a little boy she knew blinded himself when a gun went off accidentally.' That's interesting, Miss Gillespie."

"Interesting? Horrible, yes. But in heaven's name, why interesting? Except to ghouls."

"Interesting because no one specifically asked you how your sister felt about guns."

"No one specifically asked me about a lot of things, but there was certainly some hinting around. I remember a hint or two about the little boy in question, for instance. That officer who preceded you . . . Delamere? . . . seemed to feel he was a figment of my imagination. Well, his name is Barry Cummings. He still lives in this city, and if I gave you his address now I wonder if you'd find that interesting."

"Why would I?"

The brilliant smile again. "Because you haven't specifically asked for it."

I kept my face expressionless. "So you all went to bed early that Sunday night. Is that what you're telling me? You left this sick, debilitated, dying man downstairs by himself—"

"We left him downstairs because that's what he insisted we do. You didn't know Lewis very well. What Lewis wanted, Lewis got. I mean that was the law of the Cameron household. Always. It only intensified when he got sick. And I never said he was debilitated. Under a death sentence, yes. But that's not quite—"

She broke off. She knew I was waiting for her to say too much. With the smart ones that's always what you wait for, terminal mouthiness. The slow-witted ones stay sullenly quiet and never know how lucky they are.

I watched her battling. When I saw she had got herself collected I said, "Okay, I'll tell *you* what happened that Sunday night. He roughed her up again, which is what we'd have been able to see the signs of if you hadn't hidden her away. He roughed her up, and she shot him. She used that cute little twenty-five-caliber Beretta you claim she'd never touch. She wiped it clean of fingerprints. She wrapped the inspector's fist around it. Not bad up to that point, but

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then she panicked and took off. So now the best thing you can do is tell me where she is. If you don't, we'll find her the hard way, and nobody cuts her a break."

"Are you finished?"

"For now."

"You're mad. I don't know how that happened, but from a decent, likable boy, you turned into—"

"A cop. With a job to do. We discussed that."

"I have never heard such—"

I held up my hand. "I'm going to pass on to you something told to me when I was just a rookie. As a favor. Why? Because you're in deep over your head and maybe this'll help you see that. Okay?"

"Do I have any choice?"

"About this? Yeah. All you got to do is tell me to button it, and I will."

She said nothing.

"It may even have been your old man who first told it to me. It's about how dumb killers are, about the dumb mistakes you can almost always count on them to make. Amateurs, professionals, it doesn't much matter. Give 'em half a chance, and they'll screw up. What kind of mistake? Take the guy who does such a terrific job of scouring the scene of the crime. Wipes the prints, cleans the ashtrays, washes the coffee cup. Does this, does that. Place is immaculate. Not a trace of him left. Only just before he leaves his nervous system kicks in and he has to go to the john. Bingo, he lifts the toilet lid." I waited.

"What a colorful story, Lieutenant. Does it have anything at all to do with the subject at hand?"

"Yeah. It does. It means your sister Sherry's going down. And she's going to take you with her. You've been battling like crazy to protect her and whereas personally I may think that's terrific, the fact is she's a killer. And if you've been listening that means she's a screw-up, too."

She studied me for a moment, the blue-grays narrowed in what I thought of as a poker-player's squint. "You *did* say there were no prints on the gun?"

"That's right."

"Then what?"

"Within five minutes my phone's going to ring, and we'll know 'then what.' "

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"Sorry but I can't wait. Never kid a kidder, Lieutenant." She got up, strode for the door, purposefully enough for me to feel she just might make it through. But she didn't. She came back and sat down. She was suddenly pale. Her glance was fixed on the floor as if that bleak and grimy surface encompassed the best of what was on view in my office.

The phone rang in three. "Lieutenant Rubin," I said to Bledsoe and waited.

She stared at me intently.

"And do they match?" I asked, waited again, and then hung up when I got a reply.

"I think I'm being led down the garden path," she said.

"The Beretta was clean, clean as a whistle. But she forgot about the bullets. Not the clip but the bullets themselves. Good prints all over them, matching those on the comb and brush we found in her bedroom."

"You're lying to me, I know you are."

I kept silent.

"Aren't you?" Her eyes probed, but there was more than searching going on. What was going on was a last-ditch effort at recruitment. Finally, her shoulders sagged a little and her glance fell from mine like a battle flag being lowered. "Oh God," she said, "what will happen to her?"

"He beat her badly?"

"He broke her nose. And he would have done more. He might have killed her. He called her a slut, a whore, said she was sleeping with everyone in the NYPD. He didn't believe a word he said but that never mattered. When he was in a rage . . . I heard him shouting. I heard her screaming. But by the time I got there . . ." She broke off.

"It was a mistake to run," I said.

"Don't you think I know that? I did everything I could to talk her out of it, but she was terrified. All she could think of was hiding."

"Yeah," I said.

She was silent a long moment and then stood up. She looked at me, the gaze direct but hard as hell to read. "I only ever had one hope," she said. "It was that I could persuade you to help, that I might make you see you had more to win by losing." She reached the door and stopped there. "You're a fool, you know."

"Am I?"

"Oh yes. There was a chance for us, and you turned your back on it as if the next one would be along at some regular interval, like

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subway cars. And the really terrible thing is you made it look easy."

"It wasn't easy."

"But a cop is a cop is a cop, right? What is that, like a call to the priesthood?"

I crossed the room to her, put my hands on her face, and leveraged her head backwards so that our eyes could do nothing but meet. "Did you think I was in it for the money?"

She wrenched free. "I'm going to her now. Will I be followed?"

"Yes."

"Will you tell whoever does it to give me five minutes before coming up? Is that too much to ask?"

"No."

She nodded.

"Listen," I said, "a little bit later on maybe I could—"

"Please don't. Ever." She took a deep breath. "Suddenly, I can't stand the sight of you," she said and left.

After a while Bledsoe came into my office with our Hymie's Deli specials. He dropped into the chair recently vacated, the drab, beat-up, back-to-normal chair.

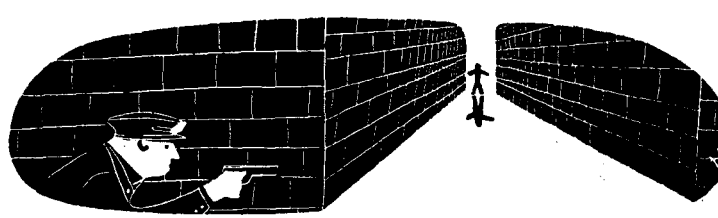
"You don't look so hot," he said.

"I'm okay."

He studied me as if there might be more to say about that, but since there really wasn't he unwrapped the sandwiches instead.

"I don't know if they *match* exactly, but they both got cole slaw and Russian dressing. That what you meant?"

"Yeah," I said and took a tasteless bite.



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In her first non-historical mystery for EQMM, *Miriam Grace Monfredo has presented us with a very unconventional whodunit. Fans of her historical stories will want to have a look too at her new novel* North Star *(St. Martin's Press, July 1993), the sequel to her Agatha Award-nominated* Seneca Falls Inheritance. . . .

THE APPRENTICE

by MIRIAM GRACE MONFREDO

The child huddled on narrow concrete steps that led from the basement of an Eighth Street brownstone. Above her the sidewalk shimmered with heat. Although Kelsey didn't think anyone could see her, she wriggled down one more step—but now she couldn't see anyone coming. Sweat made her T-shirt stick to her skin; she stretched out the neckband to blow on her bare chest. It had been cooler in the brownstone. But she couldn't go back inside yet. She laid her cheek against the cold iron railing. And wished she would stop crying.

When she inched up one step for a quick look, a man with a beard was rounding the street corner. Kelsey stiffened and ducked, and her stomach fluttered like a snared bird. She ground her fists into her eyes, pushing hard against the tears. But then she thought of something: that might be the *sorcerer* coming.

Cautiously poking her head up between the black bars of the railing, Kelsey peered through it. The bearded man walked toward the brownstone across the street, and now that she could see him clearly, Kelsey grinned. Yes, it was the sorcerer. She pushed red wisps of hair away from her eyes so she could watch him.

He didn't look much like a sorcerer. But she decided she might not know exactly how real sorcerers did look. She had seen drawings of wizards with tall pointed hats and purple cloaks covered with curved moons and stars. They always had long gray beards. *He* had a short black beard and wore a brown raincoat. Mostly he looked to her like a regular person. Of course, the wizard of Oz looked like a regular person, too—but he wasn't a very good wizard.

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She felt better now. Summer dampness had turned to drizzle, and the headlights of cars were round yellow eyes staring at her through the grayness. Kelsey crouched in the stairwell, listening to tires slicking over wet pavement. Exhaust and gasoline mixed with the thick, rich smells of stores and restaurants and the hot-dog stand around the corner.

She waited while the sorcerer went into his brownstone. Then she scampered up the basement steps and ran across the street. She rang his doorbell with the secret signal—two long and one short—he had taught her to use. When he opened the door, he had already taken off his raincoat and was pulling a black sweater over his head. His face looked sharp and pale between the sweater and his black hair. Kelsey thought his nose was like the curved beak of a bird. He drew her inside, closed the door, and locked it.

"Does anyone know you're here?" he said, looking down at Kelsey with dark, careful eyes.

"No," she said. "I didn't tell anyone."

He nodded and walked toward a kitchen—at least Kelsey thought it must be a kitchen because it had a microwave. She followed him, smelling orange and cinnamon tea in the mugs he put on the desktop.

He pulled a chocolate bar, lumpy with nuts, from his pocket and held it out to her. Kelsey took the bar, broke it in half, and handed his piece back to him, then slid onto a chair and watched him pour boiling water from the microwave into the mugs. He set one down on the desk in front of her.

She let the chocolate melt in her mouth, but she didn't want the tea. It took too long to cool. "Can we do it?" she asked him.

"Right this minute?" he said, his black eyebrows lifting like wings. Then, "Where are your father and mother?"

"They've gone. Took my Aunt Lucy and Uncle John, and my Grandmother and Grandfather Crane home. They won't be back for a while. Please, can we do it now?" she said, slipping off the chair to stand close in front of him.

"Go over there," he said, pointing to a black sofa. He switched on the lamp that cast a circle of yellow light.

The great river rocked in the cradle of its banks, as slowly it moved south to the sea. Willows poured green-leafed falls into the river, and the summer sky overhead was so blue . . .

"Blue as yer eyes, Miss Kelsey," called Huck.

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Kelsey heard him just as her head broke the surface of the water. Huck sat cross-legged on a raft of rough logs. Standing beside him, a tall black man poled past the shallows. Kelsey drifted beside the raft and listened while Huck told about when he and Jim set off downstream, running away, both of them, from their own particular slavery.

Huck puffed little clouds from his corncob pipe. He told her about the lickin's, and the time he'd had to set up all night with a gun on his lap, 'cause he was scared his pap was gonna kill him with a knife.

Kelsey liked most of Huck's story, but not the parts about lickin's and knives.

"Why do children get lickin's?" asked Kelsey.

"Appears like you don't know a whole lot, do you, girl?" said Huck. "Well, big people lick li'l kids—'cause they's kids, I'd reckon."

"Is that fair?"

"It ain't a case of fair, Miss Kelsey. It's a case of size. A case of size fer sure! Hey, ain't *you* ever bin licked?"

Kelsey felt her stomach flutter. "Are you and Jim going to ride on this river forever?" she asked.

Huck nodded. "Reckon it sure beats gettin' civilized. But you *sure* you ain't been licked?"

"I need to go now," Kelsey said.

"Okay. Jim," he said to the silent man with the pole, "Jim, we got to pull into shore."

Kelsey felt the water suddenly swell, lifting her toward the sky.

"Hey there," yelled Huck, "don't go flyin' off. Grab hold of the raft now, y'hear?"

Kelsey looked down and saw the sorcerer sitting under a willow in an arc of sunlight.

The autumn afternoon without wind was like magic, Kelsey decided; the trees let go and their leaves fell down straight and soft as golden snow. By the next day they would cover the sidewalk like an enchanted carpet.

Her stomach had stopped hurting, but her face felt cold. She pulled her sweatshirt down, then yanked the hood up over her head. While she waited, she sniffed at the sharp fall air—like the red spaniel that lived down the street.

The sorcerer walked toward her through the leaf snow, his head and shoulders flecked with gold stars. Kelsey remembered when she had first found out for certain about him.

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"Why is this spiky tree growing here inside your house?"

"It is a hawthorn tree," he had said, as though that explained everything.

And it did. When Kelsey found *hawthorn tree* in her father's encyclopedia, the entry ended with: *It is still believed by some that ancient sorcerers stood under hawthorn trees to cast their spells.*

Well, of course.

Now, while he brushed the leaves from his coat, Kelsey told him about the funeral. Her Aunt Lucy had died. Kelsey had had to sit quietly in the church pew between her father and mother; the funeral service went on forever and ever.

After forever, all the relatives gathered at her Grandmother and Grandfather Crane's house to eat and cry. Kelsey saw her Uncle John, his eyes red and swollen, holding the hand of her cousin Melissa. Now Melissa had no mother. Kelsey wondered what it would be like not to have a mother—what a horrible girl she must be to wonder that! No wonder her stomach hurt.

Kelsey had gone to stand beside the front door. She had wanted to go home.

While she told him this, the sorcerer had been silent, watching her with his careful eyes. Now he asked her, "Does your stomach still hurt?"

She realized she'd been rubbing herself. "No!" she said quickly. "No."

The sorcerer kept watching her as he said, "Shall we do it again?"

Kelsey nodded. "But not the river this time. I don't want to hear about children getting lickin's. It's not right, is it?"

The sorcerer leaned down until his face was close to hers. "What do *you* think?"

"I think it's not right," Kelsey said. She remembered the enchanted leaves on the sidewalk. "This time, can we go on a flying carpet?"

The sorcerer led her toward the sofa in front of the bookcase; a beam of light appeared over his fringed rug—just before it soared into the air.

Sunbeams slanted through the pink marble arches of the palace courtyard. Under every arch was a fountain. The water leapt in the sun and fell with a tinkling sound on fronds of huge-leafed palms. The air smelled of sugared dates and spices.

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All the other children clustered together on marble steps, but Kelsey floated just above a silk cushion. She reached down to finger its long tassels. On other cushions sat Ali Baba and Sinbad, Aladdin, and Princess Buddir al-Buddoor.

Under a purple-fringed canopy, Scheherazade knelt on a pink cloud and told wondrous tales, weaving threads of the stories together like the strands of silk running through Kelsey's hands.

Scheherazade told of Ali Baba and the cavern of forty thieves; of Aladdin and his powerful genie with a voice like thunder; of Sinbad enslaved by corsairs, almost eaten by a one-eyed giant, and carried through the air by an enormous bird.

When she ended the story of Sinbad's adventures, Scheherazade said in a flutelike voice, "And so Sinbad escaped the most terrible circumstances by his quick wit and his courage."

Sinbad jumped up and bowed low. Kelsey thought his billowing pants looked like the legs of the elephants he had ridden. How could he be so brave? He was so small.

Kelsey drifted on the magic carpet up through the long, misty corridor. The sorcerer, from far away, said to her, "What did you think about Aladdin's uncle, the evil magician, who beat the boy and buried him alive under a great stone?"

"The genie in the lamp saved Aladdin," said Kelsey. "Do you think I could find a genie?"

"That is not an answer to the question I asked," said the sorcerer, his voice now so close Kelsey wanted to cover her ears.

"Well, *my* uncle isn't an evil magician," she said, after she'd thought hard about his question. "My Uncle John is Melissa's father. And he's a nice man."

The sorcerer looked at her intently. "Are you sure about that?" he said softly.

Kelsey concentrated on the snowflakes hitting the windowpane, trying not to hear the baby wailing in the bedroom. It wasn't that she disliked the new baby. But there wasn't much to like. At least, not yet.

Her mother was tired. But as long as Kelsey could remember, her mother had been tired. She almost always stayed in her bedroom, sipping from a flower-shaped glass.

The worst thing about the baby arriving was all the people who arrived with it. Kelsey was glad to see her Granny Stuart from Rhode Island, who was her father's mother, and a widow. But the

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cousins and aunts and Uncle John, and her Grandmother and Grandfather Crane who lived across town—it seemed there was always someone who shouldn't be there in the brownstone every day.

There was no place to hide. But sometimes, she would sneak out and run across the street to the sorcerer's house. If only she wasn't so small. She wished the sorcerer would turn her into a ferocious red lion. But probably he wouldn't. He thought she should be a girl.

One silent white afternoon she ran out of the brownstone, pulling on her jacket and mittens. She crossed the street and waited on the sidewalk, watching birds swooping over snow-shrouded trees and crying into the wind.

She saw the birds' beaks open and close against the sky, but there was no sound. Why couldn't she hear the birds? Maybe it was true: maybe if she told something bad, she would never hear anything again.

Then the sorcerer came down the brownstone steps, and they walked together into the park and sat on a stone bench. He handed Kelsey a chocolate bar. She inched closer to him and heard the pigeons murmuring at their feet.

Startled birds scattered as the horse's hoofs click-clacked over the cobblestoned London street. Kelsey hovered just above a young man driving a carriage, who pointed out bleak factories looming into the sky. Smoke and soot hung in the air. The smell from the gutters along the street made Kelsey's eyes water.

She heard a high-pitched whining sound. It became one great keening voice, and scores of children tumbled out of the factories' doors as though they had been spewed from dark open mouths.

Kelsey stared at their rags, their thin, hungry look. They blended somehow into the street so that it seemed the very cobblestones were moving.

"What were they doing in those places?" she asked the young man.

"Working," said Oliver. His face was tight and closed as he motioned the coachman to stop the carriage.

Kelsey watched the children run off down the dozens of narrow alleyways growing like twisted arms from the trunk of the main thoroughfare. "Who takes care of them—where are their mothers and fathers?" she asked. "Where do they live?"

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"For some, the streets are their families. They sleep in the alleys, the thieves' kitchens, and the night shelters."

"You don't," said Kelsey.

"I used to," Oliver said harshly, twisting on the seat to watch a man emerging from the shadows of a building. "Fagin," he muttered.

Kelsey saw a shriveled old man running bony white fingers through his matted hair. He grinned hideously, and his long fingers never stopped moving, turning and twisting around one another.

"Who *is* he?" she whispered to Oliver.

"Watch," he said.

Several children ran up to the man, gave him something, then darted away into the shadows like small brown birds. One boy, shaking his head, stretched out an open hand, then drew it back.

Fagin hit him. Hard. The boy doubled over and rolled groaning into the filthy gutter.

Kelsey tried to fly away, but she couldn't. And she couldn't stop looking at the man's long white hands, constantly moving, never still. . . . Her Grandfather Crane always had dirty fingernails. Kelsey hated that.

"No, please." She was trying not to cry. "I want to go away from here. Please." Her eyes cast frantically over the dark street.

The sorcerer appeared at the corner, holding the horse's reins.

Kelsey was quiet as she rode up through the foggy cobblestoned corridor. Back in the sorcerer's house, she said, "That boy . . . I think that man hurt him. And the boy didn't even do anything bad—did he?"

The sorcerer looked his careful look and shook his head.

Kelsey said, "It's a very lucky thing that Oliver grew up."

"But sometimes," said the sorcerer, "if a child does not know she is being hurt, she might never grow up."

Kelsey walked slowly, head down, sneakers scuffing the new spring grass growing in the sidewalk cracks. Her report card was stuffed in her jeans' pocket. The teacher hadn't said anything, just handed her the envelope with a frown. When Kelsey opened it in the girls' room stall, she felt a kind of disappointment, as though she had lost something important that she thought was hers. She threw up in the toilet, but she didn't feel better afterwards.

She stopped walking to hitch up her jeans and pull her belt a notch tighter. She had to go home. Granny Stuart was visiting again from Rhode Island, but she would be disappointed with Kelsey, too.

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* * *

Kelsey stood just outside the door of her mother's bedroom. Did they know she was still there? She probably shouldn't listen.

"Adrienne, something's *wrong* with that girl!" It was Granny Stuart's voice.

"What do you mean—wrong, Mother Stuart?" asked Kelsey's mother.

"I've told you before, she's not the same grandchild I knew a year ago, when you lived in Providence."

"Well, now, Mother Stuart, you don't see her all the time. Just on your visits. So, of course she looks different to you. For one thing she's older. . . ."

There was a long silence, so Kelsey squatted in front of the door to look through the keyhole.

Her grandmother was just staring at her mother. *"Older* has nothing to do with her thinness, her withdrawn look, that tenseness," Granny Stuart said. "The child I knew in Providence was outgoing. Friendly. And bright. Look at this report card. Her grades are below average. Something's very wrong with her, Adrienne!"

Kelsey pulled away from the keyhole. She shouldn't listen—they were talking about someone else. Some other girl.

But she could hear her mother's voice scale upward. "So why don't you talk to her father. He's what's wrong. Your son, Mother Stuart, is never home. He stays at the university almost every night. I feel so alone. Talk to *him* about what's wrong . . ."

Her voice trailed off in a whisper. Kelsey couldn't hear any more. But she was scared for the girl Granny Stuart had been talking about. What if the girl couldn't tell what was wrong? What if she didn't know?

Beneath a ray of sunshine streaming into his hole, the White Rabbit rolled off the edge of the chessboard. He scurried to safety just before the scepter crashed down.

"Off with your head," screamed the Red Queen.

"Off with *yours,"* Kelsey said, glaring at the creature. Then she drew back, suddenly frightened. What had she said? She bit her lip and whirled around to look for the sorcerer. He floated up through the hole, but she had glimpsed his face.

Why was his mouth twitching?

* * *

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A week before, Granny Stuart had had to go home. Kelsey cried, and wanted to go with her to Rhode Island, and even though Granny Stuart said, "Yes," her father had said, "No—why would Kelsey want to leave her family?"

And now it was the Fourth of July. Her Grandmother and Grandfather Crane always had a picnic on the Fourth. This year's had begun in the early afternoon and Kelsey, in the crush of people, had lost her mother and father. Now she ran out of the house to look for them. When she found her father, he was standing with her Uncle John and others who had gathered in the backyard.

"Can we go now?" Kelsey asked him. "Can we go home, please?" She felt frightened and confused, and her stomach ached. She thought she might throw up.

Kelsey heard her father's voice from so far away she had to strain to hear him answer, "We have to stay for the fireworks. But why do you want to leave? Do you feel all right, Kelsey?"

She thought her father looked at her anxiously. But she knew that he wouldn't take her home. "I'm okay," she said.

"You seem flushed. It's hot out here. Why don't we go in the house where it's cooler." Her father reached out his hand toward her.

"No!" She backed away from him.

He looked surprised, then angry. "Kelsey, what's the matter with you? You act like you're afraid of me."

Kelsey shook her head, the confusion closing around her like a giant hand. She wanted to say—something. But she didn't know what to say.

Her father turned to answer something Uncle John asked him. Kelsey waited as long as she could, then slipped away from him into the shadow of trees surrounding the house.

She looked back. No one was watching. She reached the front sidewalk and started running.

"I want to do it right now," she told him, pressing her stomach—she could feel it trying to climb into her throat. Probably from running up the steps.

"Where are your mother and father?" asked the sorcerer.

"At the picnic."

"How did you get back here alone?"

"I walked to the subway."

"You must never, *never* do that again. It's not safe for you."

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"Who cares? No one . . . no one cares about me. But I'm not bad—am I?"

He shook his head, while his dark eyes studied her; they had an expression Kelsey had never seen before. "Where was the picnic?" he said softly.

"You know where it was." Did he know? *Did he know?*

"Yes. I know."

She hugged herself, shivering in the July heat. "I want us to do it. Right now."

"Yes," he said. "I think this is the time."

They watched the little girl in a red hooded cape pick wildflowers in the deep green woods.

"How old is she?" Kelsey asked the sorcerer.

"She could be any age," he answered as they followed the little girl through the trees.

"Where is she going?" Kelsey said.

"To her grandparents' house."

Kelsey felt the flutter, as if a soft-winged bird had flown inside her, hovered a moment, and then flown on.

Outside the woods the sun shone brightly, but inside the trees grew so thick, so tall, that the light was dim and silvery. Suddenly they came to a circle of sunlight over a grassy clearing. A tiny house stood in the clearing. Carrying her flowers, the little girl ahead of them climbed the steps and went inside.

The sorcerer motioned to Kelsey. "Follow her. Go and see what is inside."

Kelsey hung back, shaking her head. The soft-winged bird had returned and stayed.

"Go inside," said the sorcerer. "Look for the girl in her grandmother's bedroom."

He gave her a nod, but Kelsey hesitated. Again the sorcerer nodded, and touched her shoulder. Kelsey bit her lip and looked up at him. When he nodded again, she slowly climbed the steps and entered the house.

It seemed very quiet inside. The front room was bare, as was the long hall beyond. Kelsey heard a murmur of voices and followed the sound down the hall. She came to a small room and stopped just inside the door.

The little girl stood talking to her grandmother, who was sitting in a large bed. The grandmother's head was turned away and cov-

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ered by a white ruffled cap, so Kelsey couldn't see her face.

The little girl talked softly; Kelsey could hardly hear her until she said, "But, what big hands you have, Grandmother."

The bird inside Kelsey began to beat its wings faster. The grandmother climbed out of bed, the large figure covered by a long nightgown. A deep voice said, "My hands are big to hold you better."

The hands reached toward the little girl and pushed back the red hood. They unbuttoned the cape, and it dropped to the floor.

Kelsey felt strong wings beating inside her. "No," she whispered to the little girl. "No. Run away." But she couldn't run.

The big hands held the child's shoulders; then they began to move. The child whimpered and tried to pull away, but the hands gripped her tightly. The grandmother's white ruffled cap fell back from her face.

A face with a gray beard.

Kelsey felt the scream in her stomach fly to her throat, but the room remained silent. She squeezed her eyes closed. And felt the big hands move again. Now Kelsey could hear the scream; she stumbled out of the room and ran, while the sound of fear raced ahead of her down the endless hall.

The door . . . where was the door? The door was gone!

Crying, she beat on the walls with her fists, the hurt and shame as thick as the walls. "Let me go. Let me go or . . . or I'll tell. *I'll tell.*"

The walls disappeared.

The house around her vanished.

The man with black hair and the nose of a bird sat in his circle of light. Kelsey jumped off the sofa and ran to him.

"Who has been hurting you?" he said. "Tell me."

"It was . . . I can't tell," she cried.

His arms went around her, holding her cries. He wiped her eyes with the tissue from a box on his desk, then said with great care, "Evil things have been done to you. You *have* to tell."

Kelsey struggled against the tears. "I don't know if I can—he told me not to."

"He won't hurt you anymore," the sorcerer said, "if you can tell me, Kelsey. *Tell me.*"

"It wasn't . . . wasn't Grandmother in the bed."

"Who else would be in Grandmother's bed?"

"You *know.*" She hit his chest with her fists. "You know it was Grandfather Crane!"

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"Yes, now I know," he said. "And you have to tell."

"I just told you."

He shook his head. "You must tell your Grandmother Stuart in Rhode Island. She will help you—she promised me she would."

Kelsey pulled away and looked up at him. "Then you're not a sorcerer—at least not all the time—are you?"

She thought she'd said something he didn't like; his mouth twitched, but then it curved upward. Kelsey had never before seen him smile.

He put the volume of fairy tales back in the bookcase and, while he telephoned, Kelsey stood close beside him. She heard Granny Stuart say, "Hello?"

"Mrs. Stuart? This is Dr. Sorensen. We have the answer to what you and I . . ." He stopped when Kelsey held out her hand. "Do you want to tell her, Kelsey?" he asked.

Kelsey nodded slowly and reached for the phone.

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